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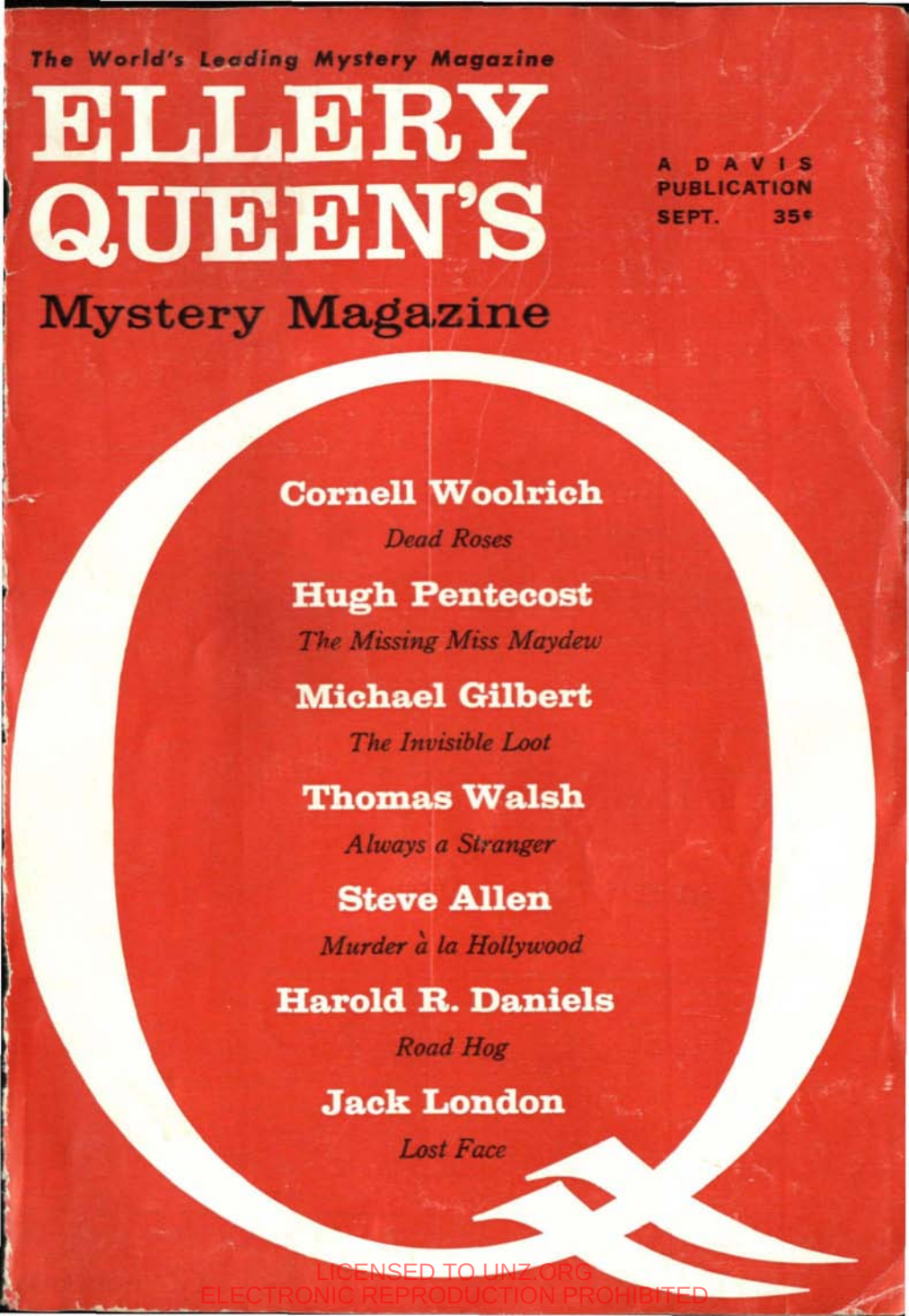

Cornell Woolrich
Dead Roses

Hugh Pentecost
The Missing Miss Maydew

Michael Gilbert
The Invisible Loot

Thomas Walsh
Always a Stranger

Steve Allen
Murder à la Hollywood

Harold R. Daniels
Road Hog

Jack London
Lost Face

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ELLERY QUEEN'S
Mystery Magazine

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PUBLISHER: *B. G. Davis* EDITOR: *Ellery Queen*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 34, No. 3, Whole No. 190, SEPT., 1959. Published monthly by Davis Publications, Inc. (formerly Mercury Publications, Inc.) at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription $4.00 in U.S.A. and possessions and Canada; $5.00 in the Pan American Union; $5.00 in all other countries. Publication Office, Concord, N. H. Editorial and General offices, 527 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. Change of address notices, undeliverable copies, orders for subscriptions, and other mail items are to be sent to 527 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. Second-class mail privileges authorized at Concord, N. H. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Concord, N. H. under the act of March 3, 1879. *© 1959 by Davis Publications, Inc. (formerly Mercury Publications, Inc.) All rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in U.S.A. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.*

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a new story by

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AUTHOR: **HUGH PENTECOST**

TITLE: ***The Missing Miss Maydew***

TYPE: Mystery Story

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: 1948

COMMENTS: *Craig Hunter was a struggling young actor, now between engagements, and with not even a roof over his head. But there were others in the profession far worse off . . .*

MR. CRAIG HUNTER WAS VERY young; and very handsome, and his feet hurt. As he climbed the front steps of the brownstone house in New York's East Twenties he was, to put it in the vernacular, dragging. But after ringing the doorbell he pulled himself together so that he looked rather jaunty; he assumed an air of youthful gallantry.

The door was opened by an attractive woman of about sixty. She wore a simple cotton house dress covered by a full-length apron. Her speech was cultivated and pleasant, her smile friendly.

"Good afternoon, young man," she said.

"Mrs. Dresden? Mrs. Cora Dresden?" he asked.

"Yes."

"My name is Craig Hunter," he said. He smiled his very young, very charming smile. "You are just about my last hope, Mrs. Dresden."

"Oh, dear," she said. "If you are selling something, Mr. Hunter—"

"I am," he said. "Myself!"

"I—I don't think I understand," Mrs. Dresden said.

"I am an actor, Mrs. Dresden."

She smiled. "Oh, I could see that right away, Mr. Hunter. But that doesn't mean you aren't selling something. I mean—between engagements—"

"You've hit the nail right on the

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head, Mrs. Dresden," he said. "I am between engagements. I had my first break—a good small part in a Broadway show. But after the out-of-town tryout in Philadelphia—"

"Closed?"

"Closed," he said. "I have very little money, Mrs. Dresden. And if I'm to hang on until something else turns up I must live most economically. I've looked everywhere in New York, but room rents are so high. Then, this afternoon, when I was despairing, a friend of mine, Tommy Enders, told me about your house, and that you have rooms—and that you are an old pro yourself and understand my kind of situation." He hurried on because he saw a small frown crease her forehead. "I really do know Tommy Enders. And I really do need your gracious hospitality. And—"

"Oh, dear, Mr. Hunter," Mrs. Dresden said. "I'm terribly afraid I'm completely full up."

Behind his smile, behind the attempt at bravado in his very young blue eyes, there suddenly appeared panic. "I—I could sleep anywhere, Mrs. Dresden. In the attic. In the coalbin—" He laughed, hopefully.

"Oh, dear. Well, at least come in, Mr. Hunter."

He followed her into the cool front hall. The aroma of what seemed to be a savory beef stew came from the rear of the house. Craig Hunter put his small canvas bag on a chair. Mrs. Dresden was looking up the stairway, frowning.

"There just isn't a place, Mr. Hunter," she said. "Except—"

"Except?" he asked eagerly.

"We are involved in a rather unusual and somewhat frightening situation here," Mrs. Dresden said. "A young girl—Millicent Maydew—have you ever heard of her, Mr. Hunter?"

Honesty seemed like the best bet. "I'm afraid not," he said.

"A lovely girl," Mrs. Dresden said, her frown deepening. "She's been with us for some time. A few days ago—well, she disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"She just didn't come home," Mrs. Dresden said. "She hadn't taken any of her things. She just—just vanished."

"An actress?"

"A very good one," Mrs. Dresden said.

"Perhaps she got an out-of-town job," Craig Hunter suggested, "and didn't have time to tell you. Perhaps you'll get a letter—"

"She wouldn't go out of town without taking any of her clothes," Mrs. Dresden said. "And if she was in town, she'd have phoned me. I'm most frightfully worried."

"I'm sorry," Hunter said. "Have you done anything about it?"

"Oh, yes. I've been to the police. They are searching, but they have nothing to report as yet." Mrs. Dresden squared her shoulders. "The point is, Mr. Hunter, I could let you use Millicent's room for a night or two—unless, of course, she

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comes back. I wouldn't want you to disturb any of her things—"

"I'd be eternally grateful," he said, and he meant it.

Mrs. Dresden led the way up to the second floor and opened the door of a room at the head of the stairs. The faint scent of a perfume —lavender, he thought it was— reached him. The room was neat. There was just a bed and a dresser and one comfortable chair by the window. And a closet. On the bureau was a framed photograph.

"I could clean out the bottom bureau drawer for you," Mrs. Dresden said. "I wouldn't want you to use the closet. All her clothes are there." Her voice was unsteady.

Hunter went to the bureau and looked at the photograph. It was that of a beautiful young girl, costumed to play Rosalind in *As You Like It.*

"Shakespeare!" he said.

"A summer production last season," Mrs. Dresden said. Then her voice broke and two big tears ran down her cheek. "I'm so terribly worried about her. But—the police are doing what they can, I know. I think—I think she'd want me to let you have the room, Mr. Hunter, until you can find something else. She knows what the beginning struggles in the theater are."

"I'm deeply grateful," he said. "And if I can help in any way—"

"Perhaps some of the young people you know might—might have heard something." Mrs. Dresden bent down and took some things out of the bottom bureau drawer. "But there—I mustn't burden you. The lavatory is just down the hall, Mr. Hunter."

Hunter took his few belongings out of the canvas bag. His two clean shirts, underwear, socks, and a clean handkerchief went in the bottom drawer. He was about to put his shaving kit and brush and comb on the bureau, but somehow it seemed like disturbing things too much. He put them on the window sill. He looked at the Rosalind photograph again. So young, so eager. Millicent Maydew was obviously a stage name. All her eggs in one basket. Like him.

Things could happen to a young and pretty girl in a city like New York. Bad things. Who would help her? Like himself, she probably had no one to help. Only old Mrs. Dresden, worried but not able to do anything beyond reporting the disappearance to the police. He felt a sudden kinship for this missing girl—alone somewhere, frightened, perhaps ill. There ought to be some way he could help . . .

Toward evening Craig Hunter walked over to Second Avenue and had something to eat in a steamy, none-too-clean Coffee Pot. He had to be very careful of the little money he had left. It was dark as he started back toward Mrs. Dresden's boarding house. He noticed a building on his left with two green lights

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burning outside the door. The police precinct house. On impulse he went in. Perhaps they might have some news.

The desk sergeant was a grouchy-looking individual, suffering from the heat.

"Yeah?" he said, belligerently.

"My name is Craig Hunter. I'm staying at Mrs. Dresden's rooming house just around the corner. I wondered if there was any report on the missing Miss Maydew?"

The sergeant glared at him. "You a relative?"

"No, but I—"

"You a friend of the family, or somethin'?"

"No. But I thought if there was any news I could tell Mrs. Dresden about it when I get back."

"Go peddle your papers," the sergeant said.

"Now look here," Hunter said, his anger rising. "This girl is alone in the city. I suppose she's just a case number to you. But there are people who are concerned about her. We have a right to know what you've learned, if anything, and I—"

"Get out of here and don't bother me," the sergeant said. "Or would you like to spend the night in a cell? We ain't givin' out anything to strangers. You ain't a member of the family and you ain't—"

"What's the trouble, McGrath?" a pleasant voice said behind Hunter. He turned and saw a man in captain's uniform. The man had a tired but amiable face. Craig told him why he had stopped in.

"You don't know the Maydew girl personally?" the captain asked.

"No, but surely—"

"Now take it easy, Mr. Hunter. We're doing all we can. You tell Mrs. Dresden that no news is good news. There's no evidence of—of foul play."

"Foul play!"

The captain gave him an odd look. "That *is* the phrase, isn't it?"

When Hunter got back to the boarding house he glanced into the sitting room, hoping Mrs. Dresden might be there and he could pass on the captain's news. It wasn't much, but as he'd said, "No news is good news." Mrs. Dresden wasn't anywhere about, so Hunter climbed the stairs to the second floor.

Outside the door of his room—Miss Maydew's room—he stopped. A strip of light showed under the door. Hunter knew he had left his lights turned off. Perhaps Mrs. Dresden was making the bed. Or perhaps Miss Maydew had come back. Hesitantly he opened the door.

Standing by the bureau was an elderly man. He had the remnants of a very handsome face. As he turned from the bureau Hunter saw that he had the brightest blue eyes he had ever seen.

"Yes?" Hunter said.

"Mr. Craig Hunter?" The voice was deep, cultivated, slightly English. An actor's voice.

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"Yes, What are you doing in here?"

"Waiting for you," the man said. "My name is Darwin Campbell. I am one of Mrs. Dresden's tenants."

"You were going through the bureau drawers!" Hunter said, standing, tense, in the doorway.

"Was I? Just—just passing away the time," Campbell said.

It came over Hunter in a surge of clarity. An old man! A lecherous old man! He'd probably annoyed Miss Maydew—kept after her and kept after her. Perhaps she'd threatened him, and he'd had to silence her. Now he'd come back, looking for something—something that would connect him with her disappearance. Perhaps a letter. Perhaps some present he'd given her.

"What were you looking for?" Hunter asked coldly. "What have you done with her?"

The bright blue eyes fixed on Hunter, unblinking. Then, very slowly, Campbell's right hand moved toward the pocket of his tweed jacket. There was a bulge there. Hunter sprang at him, grabbing the frail old arm in both his strong hands.

"We'll have none of that!" Hunter said.

He pulled Campbell's hand free of the pocket and fished in it for the bulge. He came out with it—a black, stem-chewed briar pipe.

"I think perhaps you had better close the door, Mr. Hunter," Campbell said gently but firmly.

Hunter backed to the door, closing it behind him. Darwin Campbell turned to the bureau and opened the second drawer. Hunter watched him, still wary. The old man took some sort of undergarment from the drawer and held it out.

"Ever seen one of these before, Mr. Hunter?" Campbell asked. "Or are you, perhaps, too young to be an aficionado in the matter of ladies' underthings? In its day this garment was called a step-in. A very serviceable one-piece affair." He dropped it back in the drawer. This time he brought out a long narrow box. "Look in this, Mr. Hunter."

Hesitantly, Hunter took the box, opened it, and saw six pairs of stockings, each pair in a little compartment.

"Have you bought any stockings for a young lady recently?" Campbell asked. "Probably not. But you have heard the word 'nylon,' I imagine. Those stockings, Mr. Hunter, are pure silk. I defy you to go out and buy a pair in this modern age." He took back the box and put it neatly in the drawer.

For some reason he couldn't explain, Hunter felt the small hairs crawling on the back of his neck.

Campbell turned to the bureau and took the photograph in his delicate, blue-veined hands. "You've looked at this photograph, Mr. Hunter? Here, look at it again."

Hunter took it, frowning. The

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wistful, hopeful Rosalind gazed at him, appealingly.

"Turn it over, Mr. Hunter," Darwin Campbell said, "and look at the back."

There was nothing on the back of it except the photographer's name and the date: *Lupescue 1919.*

Campbell's voice went on, gently. "I was, as I told you, waiting for you, Mr. Hunter," he said. "Captain Tabor called me from the Precinct Station and told me of your visit. Captain Tabor is a very decent, sympathetic man, Mr. Hunter." The old man drew a deep breath. "There is nothing or no one missing in this house, Mr. Hunter—except Mrs. Dresden's lost youth. Look at the photograph again, my boy, carefully."

Hunter moistened his lips. "It's a theatrical glossy. Mrs. Dresden?"

"Yes, Mrs. Dresden—twenty-nine years ago," Campbell said. "Millicent Maydew was her stage name. One day she woke up and found that 'Millicent Maydew' was gone. Some of us can bear that discovery, Mr. Hunter. Some of us can't. 'Millicent Maydew' has been preserved in this room for nearly thirty years." Darwin Campbell took a handkerchief from his pocket and blotted his lips with it. "I had to explain it to you so that you wouldn't search too hard. But we all preserve the fiction, Mr. Hunter. Mrs. Dresden could not survive without the hope that some day 'Millicent Maydew' will return. I trust you will help preserve her hope."

Hunter found it difficult to reply. His throat muscles ached. "You can count on me," he said, in a husky voice.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**CORNELL WOOLRICH**
TITLE:	***Dead Roses***
TYPE:	Detective Thriller
LOCALES:	New York City and Long Island
TIME:	During World War II
COMMENTS:	*The same modus operandi: always a young woman, always a white rosebud in her hand, always strangled—and four of them so far. Early Woolrich, foreshadowing the later masterpieces of everyday terror and suspense.*

SHE FOUND HIM IN A PLACE THAT the men in his division called "The Greek's," a lunch-counter just around the corner from the precinct house to which he was attached. He was at the far end of the counter, sitting slumped over a mug of coffee. She sidled up alongside him without his seeing her and sat down next to him.

"I guess you forgot what time our date was for."

"No," he said glumly. "No, I didn't. But what's the use? I guess you better quit seeing me. I'm just a dick on the Homicide Squad. That's all I'll ever be, I guess. And you're . . ."

"I'm what?"

"You're a rich girl, a debutante—that kind of thing. We don't belong together, Ginny. If I hadn't stopped your horse from running away with you that day in the park, we would never even have met. And maybe it would have been better for both of us."

She smiled understandingly, as though this wasn't the first time she'd heard him talk that way. "What is it this time, Terry?" she asked. "What went wrong?"

"They call him The Rose Killer," he said moodily. "And he's got to be stopped. There's a general demotion coming on if he isn't—all

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all along the line from top to bottom. We were told that just now. And it was no kidding. That's all I need yet—to go back into uniform. I'd look great then, going around with a girl like you, wouldn't I?"

"I'm not complaining," she said softly. "I've got your handcuffs on, and the key was thrown away a long time ago. What are you going to do with your prisoner?"

"Turn her loose."

"She refuses to be freed." She waited a moment, finally put her hand on his sleeve. "Then why don't you get him, Terry, if that would make it easier for the two of us?"

He gave her a look. "Nice work if you can get it," he said caustically.

"What's he like?"

"That's the stumble. He could be anybody. Nobody's seen him—only the dead—and they don't talk about it afterward. He just slips out of the shadows, kills, and then slips back again. We're no further than we were in the beginning."

She gulped a sip of coffee, as if to warm herself. "How many times?" she asked fearfully.

He held up four fingers. "And he's not through yet. It's going to be one of these chain things, if he's allowed to keep on."

"Are you sure it was always him? Couldn't it have been somebody else one of those times?"

He shook his head. "That part of it we're sure of. There's the same touch every time. You know what that is, don't you?"

"You explained it to me once. What is it this time?"

"I shouldn't be telling you stuff like this. You should be dancing at some party—not listening to things like this."

"Anything that concerns you concerns me. I want to know."

"It's always the same—a rose. A white rosebud. A death rose. He puts it into each one's hand before he leaves her lying there. We've found each one like that."

"Her?" she breathed.

"It's always a woman. A young woman of a certain age. Between nineteen and twenty-three. Never any younger, never any older."

"What is it? What makes him . . .?"

"I've been reading up in a book of abnormal psychology. It was part of the instructions we were given—not that it's helped much in tracking him down. But it has helped to clear the fog away from the motive. This is just deduction, pure and simple, but here's what I get out of it. You know what the rose is, don't you, speaking symbolically? The flower of love. It's always stood for that. So there's a shell-shocked love involved. Now the *white* rose—the bud—has an additional meaning of its own—purity, loyalty, devotion—and especially it stands for a young girl—for youth. So the factor involved here is a doublecross, committed against him by someone

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young, whom he worshipped, and who betrayed his faith in her.

"Now, the second point is this: It has always happened either during or immediately after a blackout. We all mistakenly thought at first that the greater opportunity offered by the darkness and the emptiness of the streets had something to do with it. Now we've decided that it hasn't. At least one of those crimes occurred a *full hour* after the lights had gone on again and everything had returned to normal. The victim had been seen alive and had been spoken to by numerous people well after the all-clear had sounded. It wasn't until more than sixty-five minutes later that he struck."

"Then?"

"I'm frightening you."

"This is *our* problem—not yours."

"Here, have a detective's cheap brand of cigarette to steady you."

She took an impatient puff. "Then it isn't the darkness of the blackout?"

"No, it isn't the darkness of the blackout itself. Here's how it stacks up now. The original act of betrayal occurred during a blackout. Now, we haven't had many of them over here yet, so that probably means London. They were continuous there—night after night—and the tension was terrific. Everyone's nerves stretched to the breaking point. All that anybody, who already had any latent mental instability, needed was an extra push to go off the deep end altogether. One night some one man in London did, and that's the same man that's over here now, doing this.

"Maybe he came home stunned one night, from a bomb-concussion, or with his equilibrium teetering after being dug out from being buried alive. Maybe he came home to someone he adored, someone whom he thought was loyal and true to him, and caught her double-crossing him. The details don't matter. Maybe he caught her robbing him—getting ready to run off with someone else, under the impression that he'd never turn up alive again. Maybe he even discovered some plot under way, engineered by her, to kill him if he should come back, and then collect his insurance. The result is the thing—what it did to him. It gave him that final push over into the darkness. It was a shock on top of a shock. One shock too many.

"Whether there was an original crime, at that time, has never come to light. We don't know. Probably there was, but if so, that's on the doorstep of Scotland Yard. All that we're concerned with is that he's shown up over here. And four times, during our own blackouts, the original crime has repeated itself."

"But if, in London, he once . . ."

"The mind remembers. Now every time the sirens wail and the lights go down, he lives that first

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time over again. The shock occurs again. His sanity overbalances again. He finds her, somewhere, somehow, and he kills her all over again. And then he puts a white rose in her hand. But the body *we* find is that of some innocent girl who was a total stranger to him—who never knew him—who never did him any harm—who only had the misfortune of looking a little like that first one, over in London."

She hunched her shoulders a little. Her teeth were lightly tapping together, like typewriter keys, but she was careful not to let him notice. "And how does he—is it always the same?"

"Always. Strangulation between the hands, with a thumb into the windpipe to keep them from crying out. They die in swift and sudden silence. And it must have been that way the first time too."

"Isn't there anything about him you know? At least, you do know he's English?"

"No," he said, "not even that. Hundreds of Americans have been living in London all during the war. Or for that matter, he could be any other nationality. It's just that it was probably there that it happened."

He ran his fingers through his hair, dislodging his hat a little.

"And here's what's so hopeless about it—what's so dangerous about him. He's insane, of course, but there's only this one phase to his insanity. You probably think of him as some twisted, snarling, hunched-over thing, someone out of a Boris Karloff picture, prowling along glary-eyed, with his hands curved, so that you can spot him coming from a block away. He isn't—or we would have caught him long ago. He's probably perfectly normal in appearance and behavior. Maybe even clean-cut and rather likable-looking. You could pass him on the street and never know. You could be around him for days at a time and never be any the wiser, never catch on that there was anything the matter with him. I bet many a time he's brushed elbows with our own fellows, coming and going, and they never gave him a second look. But when the sirens hoot and the corner lamp-posts go out, the scene comes back to him. Then he sees someone vaguely like her in the dimness around him—or right afterward when the lights go on again. And that one defective wire in him is jangled and—pfft!—a short circuit!"

"Don't the flowers tell you? They don't grow wild on the city streets. He must get them from somewhere. Isn't there some way of checking on who buys white roses, just before or during a blackout?"

"We've worked on that. No one buys flowers during a blackout. And he doesn't buy them ahead, because he doesn't know himself that it's going to happen to him. We don't know where he gets them. May as well admit it. He

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might never buy them the same way twice. Or he may always use the same method of getting them. He may steal them from some bush in some hot-house or conservatory that he knows of. Maybe he steps into a flower shop and buys some other kind of flower, and at the same time steals one of the white death-buds without being detected. Or he may have simply snatched one up from some street peddler, who sells so many of them one at a time all day long that he couldn't be expected to remember. Or he may have done all these things alternately, one time one, next time another."

"Terry, if you were the one to get him?"

"It would mean a citation and a promotion."

"And all the things that stand between us—that you insist stand between us—would disappear?"

"Well, they'd become a lot slimmer." He flung his cigarette down disgustedly. "But what chance have I? There isn't one of us who hasn't tried. We've all been working our heads off for weeks. And there isn't one of us who hasn't failed."

"Maybe you've all tried in the wrong way. You've tried as the police, out to catch a criminal," she said vaguely.

"What other way is there?"

She didn't answer that. She was saying to herself: *You haven't tried as one of the girls whom he stalks and kills.*

"Terry," she said, "what were they like? You know—the ones he killed? What was it they all had that was the same. Give me kind of a composite picture of them, can you?"

He took out a little pocket notebook and turned the pages. "I told you about the age. They were all between nineteen and twenty-three. Their average height was pretty much the same, too. They were all tall girls, around five-six or seven." He glanced at her. "About your height, maybe an inch taller. They were all dark-haired."

"How did they wear their hair?"

"I haven't got that down here. The death struggle disarranged it, of course, but I saw photographs of a couple of them. From what I can remember, they wore it sort of curly and loose, down their backs."

He closed the notebook.

"That's about as close as you can get to a common denominator among them. I suppose each had a superficial resemblance, in the dim light or shadowy darkness where he came upon them, to that long-dead love of his own."

"Where—where did it happen?"

"One took place a few blocks from a dance hall. He must have followed her away from there. Another worked late at night, in the business office of a taxi-company garage. He must have looked in through the window as he was passing and saw her alone in there. One was a girl from a small town

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upstate who came here looking for work. She was last seen at an employment agency where she registered to apply for a job. She was sent out to an address, and before she could get there a blackout occurred. She never reached the address. She was found halfway between the agency and her destination, where the blackout—and he—must have overtaken her.

"The last one worked in a department store. We think in that case he must have taken refuge in the store when the alert sounded outside. He evidently saw her there behind the counter and trailed her home at closing time. She was found right outside her own door, with her latchkey in one hand, ready to insert into the lock—and the white rose in the other.

"And that's how the record stands as of tonight. We're all waiting for it to happen again. We're like a bunch of helpless amateurs."

She didn't say anything for a long time. Finally he turned and looked at her curiously. "Why are you sitting like that—so quiet? I guess I've frightened you by telling you all this."

"Take me home," she said absently, staring down at the counter before her.

He got up, threw down a coin, and escorted her toward the entrance.

"I shouldn't have told you all that stuff. I've given you the creeps."

She didn't tell him so, but he hadn't given her the creeps. He'd given her an idea.

The hollow-cheeked, gaunt-eyed Trowbridge butler, whose face bore a startling death-like look, stepped softly up behind Virginia Trowbridge's chair, halfway through the dinner party. He whispered, "There's a gentleman asking for you on the phone, Miss Ginny. He says he's calling from some headquarters or other. I couldn't quite get the name."

She jumped up, nearly upsetting the chair in her hurry, and ran out of the room as if her life depended on it.

"This is Tom," a man's voice said when she had reached the phone. "I'm keeping my word to you, letting you know ahead . . ."

"Is there—is there going to be one tonight?" she asked in an excited undertone.

"I'm not supposed to tell you this. It's a serious matter. But you know, Ginny, I can't refuse you anything. And you promised me you wouldn't let it go any further, if I did give you advance warning on each blackout."

"I swear I won't tell anyone else, Tom. I give you my word I won't pass it on to another living soul. This is just for my own information. It's—well, it's hard to explain. It's just a whim of mine."

"I know I can depend on you to keep it to yourself. Well, the order's just gone out. There's going

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to be a complete city-wide blackout tonight."

"How much time have I—" She quickly corrected herself. "I mean, how soon is it coming—what time is it set for?"

"It's going to be at exactly nine thirty."

She looked around her. "It's twenty-five to nine now. That means in less than an hour—in fifty-five minutes . . ."

She hung up and ran for the stairs. On the bottom step she stopped short. There was a shadow cast on the wall, the shadow of a figure arched in the dining-room doorway.

"Burton, is that you?" she called sharply.

The shadow moved and the butler came around the turn of the hall, holding a small tray in his hands.

"You weren't listening to my conversation, were you?"

"No, miss. I was waiting for it to end."

"Put that down a minute and have Edwards bring the car around to the door. Hurry! I have to be out of here in ten minutes!"

He looked at her in gloomy deprecation. "Beg pardon, miss, I believe I overheard Mrs. Trowbridge say she intended using the car herself to take her friends to the opera."

She was halfway up the stairs by now. "He can come back for Mother and her friends afterward, as soon as he's taken me where I want to go. And don't say anything about it to anyone until after I've gone. I haven't time to go back in there and start apologizing."

She flung the door of her room shut and began to prepare herself. She dressed faster than she ever had before. She had a date with death—in the oncoming pall of the blackout.

She thrust her feet into a pair of newly purchased shoes, with almost stilt-like heels. Five-six or seven, he'd said; about an inch taller than you. She took a fastening or two out of her hair and let it tumble down about her shoulders. She ran a comb through it and left it that way. Worn curly and loose, down the back, he'd said, and dark-haired. Her own had been a medium brown, but three visits to a hairdresser inside of three days had darkened it progressively to a brown that was now almost black. In the dark, or in uncertain light, it could not be told from black.

She gave a couple of half turns before the glass, studying herself. Would Death know her, when he saw her? "The mind remembers," Terry's voice came back to her again. She shivered slightly, then hastily opened a drawer and ferreted out a small scrap of paper which had lain there in readiness with a name and address penciled on it. She hurried from the room.

She ran down the stairs, flashing past the dining room. The quick

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hum of conversation made her hasty departure unnoticed. A moment later she was in the car and Edwards, the chauffeur, had taken his place in the driver's seat.

As they glided into motion she reached over his shoulder and handed him the penciled scrap of paper she'd brought with her.

He looked at it, and touched his cap without saying anything.

It was only later, when they were waiting for a light, that he looked up and sought her eyes questioningly in his rear-sight mirror. "Are you sure you want to go there unescorted, miss? It's one of the cheapest dance halls in the whole city."

"I'm not only sure I want to go there," she answered firmly, "but I want to be inside the place by nine at the latest. Please be sure to get me there in time!"

Her chair at the dinner-table had remained vacant, with her unfinished glass of wine still standing before it.

The butler stepped forward and leaned over confidentially at the older Mrs. Trowbridge's belated inquiry. "She's gone out, madam," he reported, "without saying where." Then he withdrew from the room.

"Why do you keep that man?" one of the guests asked, glancing curiously after him. "I should think you would find him depressing."

"He is quite cadaverous, isn't he?" Mrs. Trowbridge agreed cheerfully. "They're very hard to obtain now. Besides, we've grown rather used to him so that we don't mind any more. It's his night off, later on tonight, and he always looks particularly gruesome on his night off."

She laughed a little and idly fingered one of the tightly furled white rosebuds she had ordered for the dinner-table decorations.

"Are you here with anyone?"

The figure standing alongside her had edged up by imperceptible degrees, pretending to watch the dancers with a sort of evasive vacancy. Every few bars of music he was closer than he had been before, and yet she could never catch him actually moving.

She shook her ahead. Something caught in her throat and prevented her from answering more fully.

"I didn't figure you were. I've been watching you the whole time you were standing here like this."

She'd been watching him too, but she didn't say so.

His face was weatherbeaten and shrewd. He was of medium height and stocky build. He wasn't actually ominous-looking, but neither was he the type to inspire confidence. She didn't like his hands. Whatever purpose had brought him up here, she was certain it was more than just the sheer love of dancing. He didn't have the limberness of the typical dancing fanatic, nor the nattiness of dress that so

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often accompanies that quality.

"I haven't seen you dance with anybody yet," he offered.

"I don't know anyone here."

He hitched up his head. "How about me, then?"

She could feel a curious, numbing little shock run through her body as her fingers touched the coarse cloth of his sleeve. "Terry would kill me for this, if he knew," she shivered.

They moved around the glistening floor in silence, very slowly.

"How am I going to know? What way is there?" she kept thinking. "I should have been prepared . . ."

"Do you come here often?" she asked.

"I never go to the same place twice."

Why not, she wondered—is he afraid?

They came back to the spot from where they'd started. The music stopped, and his hand dropped from her's. Nothing had happened. She glanced over at the large, circular wall clock above the entrance. Nine more minutes.

Others kept applauding. The music started once more. His hand came up again, this time without asking. Again in stony silence they went through the motions of their strange death dance. Occasionally a green spotlight from above would flicker across their faces, giving them the appearance of ghouls.

Suddenly he spoke. "You know, you kind of remind me of someone I once knew. I'm trying to think who."

She missed a step, got back in time again. "I do?"

She waited, but he said nothing more.

Again they were coming back toward their starting place. It took about two minutes to go all the way around. In six minutes, now.

"I like the dance halls here better than over in London, don't you?" she blurted out. She hadn't known she was going to say it herself. She would have been afraid to, if she had.

This time he lost a step. "How did you know I'd been to London?"

She had to think quickly. "I can tell by your shoes. Only the English make those heavy, thick, hand-sewn brogues."

He looked down at them, but he didn't contradict her. It was a shot in the dark, but it must have hit the mark.

Five minutes now. It was an eerie feeling, to be the only one in all that crowd who knew that at a given moment all this brightness would be blotted out.

He'd caught her that time. She was becoming careless, giving herself away. "Why do you keep looking at the clock?" he asked.

"I only—I want to see what time it is, that's all."

"Are you expecting anyone?"

Death, she thought, but she didn't tell him.

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It was twenty-six minutes past nine. Four more minutes.

The blaring music stopped and an odd silence hung over the place. This time the applause couldn't get the musicians to begin again. They wanted to rest. The dancers separated, drifting off the center of the floor toward the sidelines, trailing their inverted reflections along its shiny surface like ghosts.

They stayed together, walking around the floor. They came around to the rear of the bandstand, where there was a lane and a counter where they sold soft drinks. And on the other . . .

"Look, they sell flowers here, too," she said, her voice steady.

"Yeah, not a bad idea."

She couldn't see the clock from here. The lights were burning brighter—as if they knew—that in three more minutes they were going to die, and were having a last fling. All the others were fanning themselves, but her hands felt cold.

"Can I get you some kind of refreshment?"

"I'd rather have a flower. Just one."

"Sure. What kind would you like?" He turned aside and led her to the counter.

"You pick it out," she said and hoped he didn't notice the tremor in her voice.

He put his hand out. Then he stopped and looked at her face several times, and back at the flowers again. "There's something kind of innocent and young about you, different from most of the girls who come up here. I think this kind would go good on you."

He was holding a white rosebud in his hand.

Terry's phrase for it sounded in her mind like a warning bell. The death rose! Her eyes grew bigger and her breath came faster. She tried to hide her excitement—and her fear.

"You dropped it," he said. He picked it up and put it back in her hand a second time. Then he added, "Why is your hand shaking like that? You can hardly hold it."

"The stem is a little wet. I'm doing that to dry it."

They came back in sight of the clock again. Two minutes.

The music began, and they went out on the floor. She said to herself, "It'll happen while this one is going on. Before we come all the way around again."

She'd pinned the flower to her dress. She looked at the clock again, slyly so that he wouldn't notice. The minute hand was straightening itself out. Darkness was on its way.

For a minute everything hung suspended. Only she knew what was coming. The music crashed and pounded. The circling figures swam around. The lights blazed down.

Then suddenly a different note crept into the music. A trumpet or a horn was getting too loud and

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going off-key. First, the music submerged it, but it kept coming to the surface again. Then it climbed above and, in turn, submerged the music. It was like a foghorn now, deep and steady. The music stopped. The long-drawn eerie hoot went on and on, surging through the night outside.

A group of lights went out, leaving a circle of darkness on the floor below where they'd been. Then another circuit went out, leaving still another circle of shadows. The dancers scattered in all directions, not knowing which way to go.

A hollow voice kept trumpeting, "Lights out! Lights out!"

"Come on over against the wall," he said, "while we can still see how to get there." He took her by the arm and started to pull her after him.

The last circuit of light overhead died just as they reached the wall, but there were still two solitary bulbs burning, one at each end, over the exits.

She watched his face tensely, while she still could, in the feeble glimmer that was left. She didn't like the way he looked. His eyes kept opening and closing, as though he were suffering.

He hadn't let go of her hand. She tried to withdraw it, but he held onto it tightly.

"Stand here by me," he whispered, "so I won't lose you. Here, perfectly still against the wall."

The light at the upper end had gone out now. There was only one left in the entire place, an automatic night-light that they couldn't disconnect in time. Somebody was climbing a chair to it. She couldn't see his face any more, just his eyes, shining like little wet pebbles in the dark.

He was shaking. She could feel it through his hand.

"You don't hear the bombs," she heard him say in a smothered undertone, as if he'd forgotten where he was.

"What was that?" she caught him up.

That brought him back for a minute. "I've been through this before. Not here—some place elsewhere it was real."

"And then you went home and killed someone," she said to herself, unheard.

Suddenly, in the final instant before the last light went out, she saw something. Her free hand went to her throat, in an instinctive protective gesture. Why was he looking at her neck like that?

The last stubborn light went out and the darkness became complete. Almost smothering, it was so dense. The blackout was in full swing.

She was limp against the wall. She might have toppled over if it hadn't been for his taut grip on her hand.

She was helpless now, caught in the very trap she'd tried to arrange for him. She should have gone to the telephone while she still had

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the chance. There was a pay booth in the rear. She had seen it while they were dancing, but it was too late now.

She could hear his breathing beside her. He was breathing hard. The siren had stopped now and there was that awful, hushed, waiting silence that was even worse. It was oppressive, like a sense of doom. An occasional foot scraped restlessly, or some girl gave a nervous giggle, but for the most part they could have been alone in a vast empty cave.

He couldn't do it right here. Or could he? She wondered. Then she thought, "Yes, he could, if he covered my mouth quickly enough." What was that Terry had said? They died in sudden, swift silence.

She started violently away from the wall and choked back a scream. "What was that? I felt something touch the side of my neck."

"It was just my hand. I put it up against the wall, to lean against it."

She shuddered and tried to relax again. Then he spoke again.

"Let's go downstairs, shall we? I can hardly breathe up here."

This was it, coming now.

"We're not supposed to go out while the blackout is on."

"Just down to the street door. We can stand there till it's over. We're right near the stairs. I saw where they were before the lights went out."

He began to pull her again. If there wasn't any actual violence in the pull, there was a sort of undulating pressure that she couldn't hold out against. Her feet couldn't get a grip on the glossy floor and she tottered unwillingly after him.

They passed a few other couples standing silently against the wall and she wanted to reach out and grasp at them—call out to them to help her.

"I wanted to find out," she thought ruefully. "Now I'm going to find out!"

There was swish as he pushed aside a swinging glass door and then they were outside at the head of the stairs. There were a few couples out there, too, sitting on the steps, so it was postponed another minute or two. He picked his way down through them, still holding her hand. "Hold onto the rail," he whispered, "so you don't miss a step going down."

She kept trying to pull back, away from him, but he seemed not to notice or else he purposely disregarded it.

He pushed aside a second glass door, and they were in the open street-doorway now, cut off from all the others inside.

It was deathly still all around them. In the distance a warden's voice could be heard, shouting a warning to some householder, but it had a far-off sound, blocks away.

She was starting to lose her head. "Wait a minute, I want to go in again. Let me go in again—just for a minute . . ."

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He kept her there by flattening the hinged door against its frame with one hand, so that she couldn't swing it open.

His voice was treacherously reassuring. "Don't be frightened. I know it's scary, but isn't it better down here in the fresh air? Let's just walk down a little way, and back. Close up against the building. Nobody'll see us."

He urged her forward. She took a step or two after him, off-balance. The doorway slipped behind them, already swallowed up in the dark.

She didn't see the little alley in time, until it had already opened up beside them. He must have known it was there all along or he couldn't have recognized it so immediately in the darkness.

Suddenly his lethargy of movement was gone and he was all quick, remorseless action. The careless hand on her shoulder put on pressure, twirled her aside, thrust her headlong into the gap. He came in after her, sealing up her escape, for the alley was so narrow the buildings pressed against her.

The hand that had been on her wrist all along let go at last, clamped itself to her mouth instead, stifling the scream that was just beginning to form. The other hand reached for her neck, around toward the back.

Something snapped back there with a violent wrench, hurting her as it did—and the necklace of gold, which she'd forgotten she was wearing, was ripped away and disappeared into his pocket.

"Gee, I had to work hard for that!" he grunted resentfully, and gave her a violent fling of release, that sent her sprawling to the ground.

And that was all. It was over. He gave a quick turn on his heel and darted away, just as the all-clear sounded and the lights began to pepper on again.

She picked herself up dazedly. She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. "Just a cheap thief," she thought wryly. "Only after a necklace, worth maybe twenty-five dollars. All that terror for that!"

The lights were coming on more and more fully every minute. The windows of the dance hall overhead flared up suddenly in a rosy-orange glow, some of it spilling down the walls into the narrow alley where he'd flung her, lighting up its recesses by reflection.

As she turned to look behind her, to see if she had dropped anything to the ground, she stifled a scream and flattened against the wall.

Directly behind her, so close that if she moved another step or two she would have trodden on it, lay a hunched form. A dead girl, dark hair streaming over her face. One outstretched hand extended limply along the ground, as if in search of help. In its nerveless grasp was a white rosebud . . .

(continued on page 105)

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **THOMAS WALSH**

TITLE: ***Always a Stranger***

TYPE: Cop Story

DETECTIVE: Robert Emmet Kelly

LOCALE: 30 miles from New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Linda really didn't know the cop part of Kelly—the part of him that lives on other people's misery, becomes inflexible inside, keeps him always a stranger . . .*

KELLY WAS A MAN WHO DID EVerything well. The weather that Sunday morning might have received his personal attention—just cold enough to be invigorating, just gray enough to have no glare, with the snow just crisp enough for skiing and the scattered trees on the long slopes just considerate enough to keep always out of the way. Even at one o'clock when Linda was beginning to get tired and cold and ferociously hungry, he could lead her through woods to a little Dutch cabin that appeared as suddenly from behind dark pointed firs as if he had snapped his fingers. Inside, Dutch maids in blue and white dresses took their orders quickly; the floor was tiled; they had a corner table, and through white-curtained windows they looked out on the lake below. It was lovely and warm; there wasn't a radio; even the food was good. Over their coffee Kelly took her hands and rubbed his fingers in between hers while looking at her with a good deal of approval.

"Look," he said. "The thing's got me puzzled. And I'm not a shy John either—I've had girls before. Only none like you—none that I thought of all the time I was off duty. What would you say that was?"

"Off duty," Linda repeated, with the faintest shade of emphasis. "That's remarkable, I suppose. And I appreciate it very much. But it

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doesn't change the fact that I met you Thursday, ten days ago, and I know nothing about you. If this is a formal proposal—"

Kelly's eyes, dark and narrow, set impudently aslant in his bony face, glittered with impatience. "I've told you about me twenty times."

"Eighteen, really," Linda said. "And I remember, too. Your name is Robert Emmet Kelly, and you're twenty-nine years old. You're very nice and I like you. But you still live in the Bronx."

"What's the matter with that? You'd like the Bronx."

"I like Brooklyn," Linda said. "I like it very much. Brooklyn is my home."

"I've been there," Kelly said, taking a somber sip of his coffee. "Twice. This last time was Sunday night, and I got lost, and I walked along trying to find someone to ask my way. Half-past eight Sunday night—you couldn't say it was late. And now and again I'd think I'd see something, but it was never anything but shadows. So I walked—oh, eight miles. And then I met a guy somewhere around Coney Island."

Linda sniffed. "But of course he couldn't direct you?"

"No," Kelly said sadly. "He was lost too."

"That," said Linda, "is extraordinarily funny. I imagine Frances Devine would just laugh and laugh at it. Why don't you tell her tomorrow?"

"Frances Devine," Kelly growled with a downsliding and disgusted accent. "Frances Devine! Friday at three o'clock she calls up about her diamonds that are gone. What does that sound like, with her new show opening this week, with just enough time left so she could get a nice spread in the Sunday papers about police dumbness?"

"Uh-huh." Linda shook her head. "Inefficiency and rudeness."

Kelly lit a cigarette and exhaled smoke savagely; one of his long fingers shot out to wag under Linda's nose.

"That's okay—we thought it was publicity, sure; at first we didn't pay any attention to it. Then, when we find out it's the genuine thing, this Devine thinks all we have to do is hop out into the street and pick up the maid that scrammed with her jewel box. This maid's got a mark, which makes everything easy. You know what it is?"

"No."

Elaborate sarcasm dominated Kelly's tone. "It's a kind of a circular scar on the left temple under her hair. You see what an easy job that makes it? All we have to do is stop any blonde girls we see on the street, and tip up their hats. When we see this scar we know the blonde girl is Frances Devine's maid. And there can't be more than a million and a half blonde girls in New York. A matter of elimination."

He had released Linda's fingers long ago; he made no effort to take

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them again. Even when he looked at her his eyes were different—far off, angry, absorbed. Linda arose with a touch of pique; she hadn't wanted to change the subject quite so thoroughly. She hadn't known Robert Emmet Kelly was so much the man of moods.

They skied again, but for just a little while. At three, in Kelly's roadster they started back. It was snowing slightly—at least a few flakes drifted restlessly in the gray air, pathetic and lost. At three thirty there were more flakes, the grayness had turned to a dotted and luminous white. It got colder too, and sudden squalls of wind shoved the light car sideways, in careless pushes that shook Linda uncomfortably when they came to pass. Kelly, the man who did everything well, said there was nothing to worry about. He wouldn't admit they were lost until well after dark, when the windshield kept frosting up before him and the narrow road that could not possibly be the Parkway, or the approach to it, wound emptily ahead of them, covered with snow, unmarked by trees, delineated only by the row of ghostly tall poles that rimmed it on the right.

"Haven't seen anybody in an hour," he grunted, peering into the storm. "If we'd crossed a bridge I'd say it was Brooklyn."

"Oh, yes," Linda said.

She was a little frightened. It was quite dark now and from the yellow lanes of the headlights gigantic white flakes spun up to the windshield lazily and incessantly, with a show of careless contempt. There were no gas stations; there were no houses. The darkness was quiet and cold, weighted with snow, and the gas indicator, ominously steady, rested on E, though Kelly tried to keep his arm bent so that she would not see that. When the tank was empty, the heater would be useless; they'd have to sit here, in the dark, in the cold, until a car came. And if it was a side road, if the snow blocked it off—Linda shivered. It couldn't happen of course—not within thirty miles of New York. But—

"S'matter?" Kelly said, squeezing her elbow with his fingers. "What you so quiet about? I'd bet you'd like to stop somewhere and get something hot."

"Coffee," said Linda bitterly, "and a steak sandwich or two. Or big bowls of chicken soup and noodles. Call me when you see a sign."

"Maybe this'll do," said Kelly, the man who did everything well. Their car lurched over to the left and, peering upward from under his arm, Linda saw lighted windows, and a sign swinging forlornly from its arch in the bitter wind. *Mrs. E. A. Wallace,* it read. *The Haven. Rooms—Meals. Chicken Dinners a Specialty.*

At half-past seven the snow had not ceased. It was still falling, stirred now and again by a low whine of wind, but in the living room of The

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Haven it was warm and cozy; it was Sunday evening, and Mrs. E. A. Wallace, placid and plumply comfortable, worked on a sweater and spoke of many things. Kelly, now and again, glanced hopefully at the windows; and the light-haired girl who was Mrs. Wallace's daughter, who was up from the city now only for a week end, read a movie magazine by the stove.

She was eighteen, Mrs. Wallace said—a little young to be in the city all by herself, perhaps. But Margie was a smart girl, and with her voice she'd have a chance there. Tuesdays and Fridays, at eight fifteen, she sang on a small station. It wasn't much now; but in time, in time, Mrs. Wallace said, nodding her head, who could tell? Other girls . . . She was very proud of Margie; she talked of her to Linda most of the evening. And Linda nodded and smiled and said yes, feeling too sleepy to answer at length. A nice old lady, she thought—not old either, perhaps, but nice assuredly. A good soul! If she could only stop talking about her girl.

A drowsy time later, with Margie, she went upstairs to prepare their rooms. Only after they had been gone some time, leaving the room very quiet, was Linda struck by the curious fact of Kelly's continued silence. He was staring at the door thoughtfully; and when she called him he blinked.

"That girl," he said. "You get a good look at her?"

"No." Drowsily, delicately, Linda shivered with utter comfort at the sweep of the naked wind outside. "What's the matter?"

"A scar," Kelly answered, rather slowly. "A kind of round scar on her temple, under her hair. I just got a glimpse of it when she got up then. She's got the scar and she's blonde so she fits what I know of Frances Devine's maid. Stepping into her like this is dumb luck, but I get more than my share of that. If it's the maid—" He pulled at his nose.

"I'll bet," Linda said sleepily, stretching her toes out to the fire, "you dream about your work. I'll bet every night when you're going to sleep in the Bronx—"

Quite rudely, Kelly began to whistle then. In a moment the girl came downstairs, taking her coat from a peg in the hall near the glassed-in entry. The porch door opened and closed; through the window Linda could see her slim figure motionless at the top of the steps, the coat collar raised about her neck. Listening, Linda thought. For what? For something, perhaps, she was afraid she'd hear?

"Thanks," she said, suddenly peevish, annoyed with Kelly and with herself. "You tell such nice bedtime stories I probably shan't sleep a wink all night."

Kelly didn't answer. When the girl came in from the porch and sat down again with her magazine, he was sprawled out on the couch,

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speaking to Linda as if they had talked casually all the time she had been outside.

"I got some tickets for Wednesday night," he said. "For that new play Frances Devine's opening in. Think you'd like to see it?"

He was not looking at the girl; apparently he did not notice the panicky whiteness that flared instantly in her cheeks, nor remark the way in which she held one page of the magazine upright with a hand that was rigid rather than steady as her face raised swiftly to his. His voice went on, making unimportant conversation, stopping politely when Margie Wallace got up and said something in a low voice, as if she were excusing herself.

"But you're insane," Linda said softly after the girl had gone upstairs. "Insane! Coincidences don't happen like this. And that girl couldn't—"

"Call it luck," Kelly said. "I've had breaks like it before. Irish luck. That's the maid."

His eyes were cold and abstracted, impatient with her. It came to Linda suddenly that the Kelly who danced well, who did everything well, who was amusing and jolly and who didn't like Brooklyn, was someone she did not altogether know. She had told him that, at lunch, but it had seemed rather a joke then. Now it wasn't; unaccountably, in this quiet room, he had become a stranger. The amusing Kelly, who sometimes, in the hours during which Linda never saw him, was a policeman, a second-grade detective, might have been someone she had never met.

"You—but you're not going to arrest her?" Linda's voice shook a little; to steady herself she grasped his wrist. "You won't have to do that, Robert. She'll give the things back to you. You'll just have to ask her. Couldn't you see how frightened she was? In the morning, from the city, you can mail the box back. No one will know. Perhaps she never really meant—"

"I couldn't do that." Kelly said it flatly, with a faint point of surprise in his eyes as he looked at her. "You know I couldn't."

"You could," Linda breathed. "Who would know? How will it help to arrest a girl who's only eighteen—"

With his elbow on the mantel and his head propped in his hand, Kelly allowed his lips to twist a little.

"Skip it," he said. "If you're eighteen you know what's right and what isn't. And you're not thinking of the girl so much—it's the old lady that's the tough part. I see that too. The kid's been writing her lies from New York and she's believed them all. Something like this will break her up. Even if the kid did get singing on a small station down there they wouldn't pay her anything—she'd have to take this maid's job to eat. I can see how the kid could do a thing like this

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without thinking it over—on the spur of the moment, seeing the jewels in the box and grabbing them and getting out of town. Picking her up won't make me feel like a hero."

"Then why—"

"Why?" Kelly repeated, with no inflection. "Why can't I just forget it? I couldn't tell you that; I've never figured it out exactly."

"I might know," Linda said, with sudden scorn quivering her lips. "It would be a fine pinch. Your name would be in all the papers. It would probably promote you."

"Okay," Kelly answered quietly. "That angle isn't anything new. It was one of the first things I got used to. What good's a cop? What does he do outside of grabbing free fruit and beer, and crucifying anybody he gets a thing on? Four out of five people figure that way. They're afraid of a cop, or they hate his guts. He's a chiseler or a heel, or a guy acting tough because there's no way you can get back at him. He stands at a crossing all day long and if he don't say please and sir when a fool comes racing along and almost kills five or six kids he's blown up with his own importance and acting wise. Or he's a Cossack maybe—the first riot I ever got in, a little guy kept hitting me and crying and calling me that.

"Blubbering," Kelly went on, as if he didn't altogether understand it, even yet. "Not that I hit him at all. I couldn't. He was too small. I only carried him to the wagon and dumped him in, and after he was in there he kept hollering at me and clawing the door and bawling. You could see I was something he despised—bigger than he was, and stronger, with the guts of something you'd step on. A cockroach—a lousy Cossack. I guess he always believed I beat the insides out of him."

Linda looked at him for a moment in silence. This was another Kelly too—an entirely unsuspected Kelly.

"But you won't do what I want? That's what you mean, isn't it?"

He moved his high shoulders in a shrug that wasn't quite careless enough. He said, "I guess it is," just as someone rapped on the porch door behind them.

The someone was a man, dressed in a dark blue overcoat powdered with snow, holding a gray hat in his hands, and looking in at Linda with very bright, very cold blue eyes, after she opened the door.

"A bad night," he said, and his voice was genial, burry, but as precise and careful as the eyes that were past her, on to Kelly, in the instant that he stepped over the threshold. "And I'm sorry to bother you, lady. But when I saw your lights up here after the snow stuck my car at the foot of the hill I thought you might have a phone. If I could get in touch with a garage—"

"You couldn't," Kelly growled. "There isn't a phone. And if there

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was you'd still be stuck. Nobody's starting you on your way again in this weather. Not unless you use skis."

Linda smiled automatically. "We're stuck too. I'm afraid there's nothing you can do until the plow gets around here. That won't be until morning."

"Too bad," the man said. His eyes considered Kelly with a bright unfriendliness shining in them. "Then I guess it's your car outside. City license?"

"It could be," Kelly replied ungraciously.

The other man shrugged. He said, "I didn't know it was anything personal." Then he went over to the stove and warmed his hands, standing in a rather awkward fashion, as if he wanted to keep facing Kelly. Presently he was explaining again to Mrs. Wallace, and looking above her a moment to the stairs, nodding to Margie Wallace, who stood halfway down them. The girl's face was in shadow; she seemed to look at him from the shadow for a long while. Then she came down to the kitchen and spoke to her mother briefly before going upstairs again. A headache, Mrs. Wallace explained; rest would be the best thing for it.

"Sure," the stranger said. "That's the ticket." He spoke as if he had heard something that was faintly humorous.

Afterward, when he had finished with the sandwiches and coffee Mrs. Wallace made for him, Linda carried the dishes to the kitchen, though the older woman protested.

"Your young man wants you with him," she said. "Go on, child."

"I'll dry them," Linda said. "Please. I want to."

It took them only a few minutes. When they were done, Mrs. Wallace emptied the sink and took off her apron.

"There! It wasn't long. I declare you'll spoil me, drying the dishes and letting me talk as much as I have. You're very quiet. Are you always like that?"

"Not always," Linda said. "Tonight perhaps. I'm afraid we're a dreadful bother."

Mrs. Wallace eyed her shrewdly. "It's your young man. You're quarreling—I can tell that. But don't let it get important, child. He's a very nice young man. Tomorrow you'll see that your quarrel won't matter at all."

"Yes," Linda said, despising him, despising herself. "He's nice, Mrs. Wallace."

Kelly, who could close the door—Kelly, who wouldn't close it.

In the room that Mrs. Wallace had prepared for her, in a pair of the girl's pajamas, Linda put out her lamp and prepared for sleep. But that would not come, though she resolutely closed her eyes; somehow in the dim chamber that had a smell of cold air and clean linen and old wood in it her thoughts turned always to Margie Wallace and her

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mother, to Kelly, to that strange and rather frightening part of him that had once been a joke between them. Officer Pupp, she'd called him, and Kelly had laughed. Wasn't it a good joke? Officer Pupp. . . .

All the while Kelly, the real Kelly, had been a blank to her; she had not understood the work he did, day after day, week after week, because it was his job and he was paid to do it, She had not seen that he was a man who must live on misery, who would never be free from it, who would see a face, a hand, a mark, and harden inside, changing in an instant to a stranger. No, she had not seen that. But people like Mrs. Wallace, and the countless others whom she would never see, would not fade easily; they would always be somewhere in her mind when she was with Kelly, or when she thought of him. They would keep him always a stranger.

To Kelly they were something else. The something inflexible in him that she could neither understand nor touch kept them apart from him too. That something gave him a job to do. Here, it said, you, Kelly; you're not to think or feel. You're to do this, and this, and this. It's your job, Kelly. You can't get soft, and you can't go worrying about it. So he wasn't a man, Linda thought, with her face against the pillow—he wasn't someone you could love and be proud of. An automaton, a robot—

She turned over again and tried to forget him. High up in one corner of the window that she faced a star glittered and sparkled like a splash of frozen silver flame. One star! But if it meant that the snow had stopped—

Rising quickly, she peered out through the pane, rubbing the thin coat of frost away with one palm, until through the clear space she could see the valley and a far-off line of hills, the porch roof below her and Kelly's car squatted before the steps. It was odd that the door of that hung open now—she remembered distinctly Kelly banging it after him—and for a moment she looked down at it. Then with a quick breath she drew back from the window; in the darkness inside the car something moved.

The girl, of course, Linda thought, catching up hastily the bathrobe and slippers Mrs. Wallace had placed at the foot of the bed. She went out to the hall and down the stairs, past the dim glow of light that hung motionless under the single lamp in the living room. The porch door was slightly ajar; when she stopped by it the outer air seemed to form solidly about her, so that if she were to move she felt that the surface of it must crackle and snap like thin ice broken on water. Very softly the car door closed, and there came a crisp, light crackling of snow. But it wasn't the girl who came up the steps; it was Kelly, and rather oddly he didn't seem at all surprised to see

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her. Preoccupied, he nodded, and with the porch door closed after him took her arm and led her into the living room.

"Someone messed around the car," he said, the muscles in his jaw tight. "The boy friend probably. He'd give it a frisk before he came in here. Careful."

Realization brought up a strange different kind of inner cold about Linda's heart.

"Your gun," she whispered. "Wasn't that what you were looking for just now? I saw it in the glove compartment this morning. If it isn't there now then he—he must have taken it. But why, Robert? Who is he?"

"A very careful guy," Kelly told her softly. "Probably this Margie's boy friend. If he'd just been stopped by the storm he wouldn't go over the car and lift my revolver. He—"

"There!" Linda breathed excitedly. "On the mantel, Robert. It is your gun!"

Kelly gave a sour grin. "This?" He picked it up and held it out for her, so that she saw it was an old pistol, huge, useless, with the trigger missing and rust ringing the barrel. "The old lady's grandfather toted it around at Bull Run—she told me about it when you were upstairs—and it hasn't been fired since then. No trigger, no bullets, no—"

He moved so quickly that he had lifted her by the arms and swung her in back of him before she heard the scuffle of sound in the hall. When she could turn she saw Margie Wallace standing in the doorway, a big coat wrapped around her, her face very white under the tumbled blonde hair.

"I'm not going to tell you," she said thickly, watching Kelly with a frightened defiance. "There's a phone at Mrs. Bradley's, below the hill. If you don't leave now I'm going down there and call the police. You can't stop me."

"I wouldn't want to," Kelly said. His brows were drawn together in a puzzled fashion. "Only why go down there?" He took something from his pocket and exposed it briefly in his palm. "If you want the police—"

She whirled, startled, to Linda. "You're a policeman—you're not with him, with Charley Farraher? He didn't send you up here ahead of him to— You're lying. I know you're lying. You're pretending this to make me tell you."

"So I'm lying," Kelly agreed, his eyes still puzzled. "But who's this Charley Farraher—the lad upstairs?"

Her glance wavered between him and Linda, uncertain, suspicious. She said slowly, "Yes. He's Miss Devine's chauffeur."

Kelly was staring at her intently. "And he helped you steal—"

"Helped me!" Margie Wallace said scornfully. "Do you think I knew what had happened? He took the things Friday, when he thought

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Miss Devine would be in Philadelphia over the week end, opening with the new show. And then when the opening was postponed at the last minute, when she came to the apartment for lunch, he didn't have a chance to put them back, and I suppose he got afraid that she'd find out about it right away. That's when he put them in my bag—I'd left it in the hall. But Miss Devine said I could still take the week end off, even though she'd be there, and she didn't miss her jewels until after I'd gone. And I didn't find them until yesterday, when I unpacked that bag."

"Wait a minute," Kelly said, speaking softly. "Wait a minute! You mean you got nothing to do with taking the jewels?"

"But don't you see?" Margie Wallace asked impatiently. "He put them in my bag because if they were found there I'd be blamed. He was the only one that could have put them there. When he came here tonight I knew he'd done it, and I knew he wanted to get them back. That's why I was going to Mrs. Bradley's."

"But you called yourself Stella something when you worked for Miss Devine. And you gave her a phony address in New York where no one knew you. Why did you do that?"

"Stella King," the girl said, a slow flush staining her cheeks. "It seemed a nicer name. Margie's so—so ordinary. And I gave the address because I didn't want Mother to know what I was doing. I lied in my letters—I said the radio station was paying me fifty dollars a week. But they weren't paying me anything—they said I should be glad of the chance to get on the air. When my money ran out I got the job with Miss Devine, but I didn't give her my address here or tell her about my mother because if I did I was afraid she'd write, and Mother would find out all about it."

Kelly still looked doubtful. "How did Charley Farraher know you lived here, if you hadn't told anybody?"

"I told him. He seemed—nice at first."

"What did you do when you found the things Saturday?"

The girl swallowed. I couldn't think for a while. And then I saw Farraher must have put them there because he was alone with me in the apartment until Miss Devine came. He was the only one who could have done it. Then I was afraid Miss Devine might be out of town and he'd hurt me perhaps if I went back to the apartment alone, so I wrote Miss Devine a letter and told her what had happened."

"She never got it," Kelly growled.

"But I mailed it yesterday—Saturday. She'll get it tomorrow morning."

"Don't you get the Sunday papers? Didn't you see what they're saying about you?"

Margie Wallace shook her head.

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"I haven't seen a paper since I left the city—Friday. You mean they're blaming me? But I didn't—"

"Okay," Kelly said. "Okay. Where's the stuff?"

"In the shed, back of the kitchen. A brown-paper package in the bottom drawer of that old dresser."

"You were foolish," Linda said softly, after Kelly had gone out on light feet. "You might have been in terrible trouble. You should have told the police. Why didn't you?

"You don't think much when you're scared." The girl smiled wanly at her. "I suppose I shouldn't have been afraid of the police, but I was. When you've never had anything to do with them they kind of frighten you."

That, Linda remembered, was almost what Kelly had told her. But everything was fine now—the girl and her mother, and Kelly too. She could think of him with only a warm, fond anger stirring in her, completely forgetful of the man upstairs until she drew the robe tighter about her, twisting her head a bit to draw it up under her chin, and saw him standing in the doorway, dressed in the blue coat and the gray hat, and holding Kelly's gun in his hand.

"What is it?" he asked Margie Wallace, in a flat voice that was contained and purposeful. "Where's this Kelly? What did you tell him?"

"You'd better go before he comes back," Linda said unevenly. "He's a policeman. He'll—"

She couldn't say "arrest you." That seemed absurd—the words children would use in a game. Charley Farraher twisted his head around at her and then moved back a step to the shadow of the doorway.

Linda thought, with some small stunned part of her mind, that she had never been afraid before. Not like this, when death was a simple thing, mobile and light, a shape of steel held in the hand, the pointing of a tube, the pressure of a finger. When Kelly came back—

And suddenly Kelly was there.

He came in from the kitchen with the brown parcel in his hand. Just as he reached the couch he saw Charley Farraher. He stopped. Out of the shadows, Farraher's head jerked sideways to indicate the chair before the mantel. "Over there," he said. "Move quiet."

She tried to whisper his name; Kelly. She had to watch him because he was like a point, a buoyant center that held her very surely and calmly, very close to him. The brown paper parcel somehow had vanished; when Kelly came out from behind the couch and walked over to the mantel and sat down before it, the package was no longer in his hand.

"Smart guy," Farraher said. "Only you didn't drop it quick enough. Behind the couch, brother. I saw that. You'll just sit easy now while I get it."

Kelly shrugged. He did not move

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his right hand up and out to the mantel, to the useless revolver, that some long-dead Wallace had carried at Antietam or Manassas, until Farraher had dropped behind the couch. When the other man straightened again, with the brown parcel in one hand and the revolver in the other, Kelly was facing him from the chair, his big hand wrapped close about the butt of the heavy pistol.

He said something to Farraher but Linda did not understand what it was. Over and over in her mind his name formed, almost solidly. Kelly, Kelly, Kelly. . . . His pistol was empty. Useless. There wasn't even a trigger on it. If Farraher had tried it too, if he had seen it lying there on the mantel and picked it up and tested it—if he just looked at it now, at the way Kelly was holding it, he would know it was empty. He would . . .

"Drop your gun," Kelly said.

Farraher's eyes were fixed on his face, narrow and glittering. He didn't look down at the gun at all.

"Come and get it," he said. "Only if you do, if you get out of that chair, Kelly—"

Kelly got out of the chair. Not hurriedly, not slowly, holding the gun level at his side, he rose to his feet. "Wait a minute," Farraher said, his voice grating, his words fast and slightly breathless, his gun hand moving a little to keep trained on Kelly's chest. "I'm telling you, brother. Pass that couch—"

"Drop the gun," Kelly said. His face was lined and white, shiny with perspiration, with a clamped look around the lines of his mouth. The tip of Farraher's tongue came out and touched his lips; for an instant his eyes wavered downward. Linda prayed: Don't let him see it. Don't let him know it's empty. Don't let him look down.

"Robert," she whispered, and Farraher's bright blue eyes came up, glittering in the light. "Let him go. Don't try to stop him. He'll kill you."

Neither of them looked at her; Kelly mightn't have heard her. Walking slowly, watching Farraher he moved past the table, past the stove—he reached the girl. He didn't look frightened, but his face was paler than Linda had ever seen it, and he was breathing rather hard. "Drop the gun," he said.

"Robert," Linda whispered. But she knew that to call was useless; the something inflexible she had felt in him before, she felt again, only now it didn't make him a stranger, nor a lover; it made him something Linda could not put in words. There were only he and Farraher, coming together in this room, this little lighted space barred off by the darkness and the cold outside—he and Farraher, and no one else. The girl did not matter, nor she herself—there was just the lean man waiting near the door, and Kelly walking toward him slowly, his white face glinting with sweat, and some-

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thing obscure and resolute in his heart that no one could shame or destroy or swerve.

"Listen," Farraher said, hoarsely. "One step, Kelly—one step more!"

Something happened to the bright blue eyes when Kelly was just before him. The coldness in them broke and shattered like shreds of glass. He called Kelly a name in a low, frenzied voice that had no breath behind it, and he fired with one hand outspread flatly on the wall behind him, and the gun raised level at his chest.

But Kelly was moving fast the instant before the shot. His big gun, spanning an instantaneous steel arch of light, smashed the knuckles of Farraher's right hand down and aside from him with a noise like the slap of wet paper against a wall. In a moment they were struggling by the door, and then the closet left of them was open, and Farraher's lank form in it against the darkness, arms and legs flung out like a doll constructed of bones.

Before Kelly could lock the door Linda was up and across to him, holding his arm at the wrist, where the whiteness of his shirt cuff showed dark and wetly warm. Kelly said it was all right—it was only a flesh wound; but even after Mrs. Wallace had come downstairs and bound it up, even after all the explanations had been made and Linda and Kelly were alone again, in the living room that was disturbed only by the feeble clatter Farraher made against the closet door, Linda clung to it with shaking fingers.

"Oh, you were a fool," she said. "To do that! Suppose—"

She shivered. Suppose monstrous things! Suppose Charley Farraher had fired sooner, straighter—suppose this hadn't all happened, and she had never seen the part of Kelly's job he was the last person in the world to talk about? It wasn't all misery; it was—well, protection, perhaps, and help, to people who sometimes couldn't help themselves. It was something, Linda thought, that was very hard to see; but it was something too you could take pride in.

Kelly was holding her very close with his good arm, murmuring now, although masterfully.

"All this," he said, "won't get anything for you. You know it's still the Bronx?"

"I know," Linda answered. "And I might love it."

"Just tolerate it," Kelly said, with his lips muffled against her hair. "You'll have quite a job loving me."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HAROLD R. DANIELS**

TITLE: ***Road Hog***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Fat Ed Fratus dealt in nickel Lucky Charlies, dime Jackpot Aces—and worse. He was a mean little man—mean for the sheer sake of meanness . . . A powerful story.*

IT HAD BEEN RAINING, OFF AND ON, for two days when Ed Fratus parked his small green panel truck in the rutted mud outside Ben Tulip's juke and switched off the motor. He got out, a red-faced, irascible-looking little fat man in soiled seersuckers, and picked his way across the spongy clay carrying a black imitation-leather suitcase. There were half a dozen men in the juke and Ben Tulip himself was behind the linoleum-covered bar. He reached into the cooler for a bottle of beer when he saw Ed. He brought it out, cold and sweating, and passed it to the fat man.

"Been a week," he said. "Where you been?"

One of the loungers heehawed. "Ed," he said, "he prob'ly been in jail, what he carries around in that car o' his."

Ed Fratus turned to the man who had spoken. "You got a big mouth," he said with a smile that had an underlying viciousness.

"You don't have to get sore," the man mumbled.

Fratus ignored him and swung his suitcase up on the bar. He opened it and took out a stack of brightly lithographed punchboards. Ben Tulip said, "Give me a dozen of them nickel Lucky Charlies. Six of them dime Jackpot Aces."

Fratus stacked an assortment on the bar. "How about the quarter Lady Fortunes?"

Ben shook his head. "Ain't sold the ones I got. Paid out twenty bucks on one before it was half punched out. Nobody wants to play it, now the big winner's gone."

Fratus took out a card with a dozen key rings stapled to it. "How

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about a couple of these? Two bucks a card. You sell them for fifty cents, make yourself four bucks clear."

One of the loungers said, "Nobody'll pay fifty cents for no key ring. Buy them in town for a quarter."

Fratus said, "Not like these." He took one from the card and flipped it to the man. "Look through the hole at the top." The man squinted through the ring and broke into a grin. "Be doggoned," he said. "Look at that there!" He handed the ring to his neighbor: "Let's see another one, Ed. They all different?"

Fratus nodded. "All different. You want to see 'em, you have to buy 'em."

The man who was now looking through the ring snorted. "Now you look at that! How you figure they get all that picture in a little thing like this ring?"

Ben Tulip nodded to Ed Fratus. "I'll take a couple of them cards," he said. "What else you got?"

"Got some playing cards. Got some booklets. New stuff." Fratus drained his bottle of beer. "Let me have another bottle of beer and I'll go out to the car and get some samples."

Ben nodded. "Maybe you'll have time for a little poker game afterwards?"

Fratus said, "Sure, for a little while anyway. Then I got to get on over the other side of Lost Creek."

Two hours later Ed Fratus threw a beaten poker hand onto the cigarette-scarred table in Ben Tulip's back room. "I'm done," he said. "Dammit, Ben, I don't know about this game. You took forty bucks from me and I didn't hold anything but good hands."

Ben Tulip said ominously, "You watch what you say, Ed."

Fratus looked at the impassive faces of the men around the table and felt thick frustration rise up in his throat. Forty bucks and to a bunch of rubes, he thought. Forty bucks, made the hard way, peddling punchboards and dirty little gimcracks. He buried his inner rage under a crocodile smile.

"Man that loses has the right to cry a little," he said. "Didn't mean anything by it, Ben." He reached for his seersucker jacket. "I got to get along."

One of the players asked, "You taking the old tote road over to Lost Creek?"

"I plan to."

"Watch her. She's greasy as sidemeat. You slide off into the ditch and you'll never get out 'less you get Old Sam Pine to drag you out with a team. Better have lots of gas, too. Ain't a thing on that whole twenty mile stretch 'cept Sam's place."

Fratus shrugged into his coat. "I've drove it before," he answered the man. "It's all right if you stay right in the middle."

At the time Ed Fratus was throwing his final hand in, Old Sam Pine,

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moving with massive dignity, came out the back door of the stately old house that had been his father's and his father's father's. He was close on to his sixties but he had the erect carriage of a young man. He squinted piercing blue eyes in a weathered face against the glare of the fast fading western sun that glinted from his white hair.

He was a proud man, Old Sam. Proud of his three sons. Proud of this house. Proud of this land—but not so proud that he didn't take time, now and again, to look across the fallow fields of his holdings and be humble. The flat rays of the setting sun touched highlights of living gold here and there in the dark green pastures. Yonder a heifer lowed, the sound coming across the fields lonesome but somehow soothing.

There was the sound of a commotion in the direction of the barn, followed immediately by a man's voice, sharp with urgency. "Pa, Pa! Give me a hand here!" Swelling above the voice was another sound, the awesome bellowing of a grown bull. Old Sam, moving with old grace, swept into the barn to see his middle son, Clay, poised like a soldier with a pitchfork for a bayonet. Bulking like a mountain before him was the mighty brindle mass of Comanche, the prize Hereford bull. The big animal rumbled and thundered and shook his curly poll as he tried to parry the thrusting tines of the fork.

Sam saw two sickening things: Davey, the youngest of his sons, crumpled on the floor of the barn. And red painting on the near horn of Comanche.

Clay gasped out, "Davey left the box stall open. He got him twice before I got to a fork." He lunged at the bull. "I told Davey the dirty brute would go mean some day."

Old Sam grasped Davey under the arms and dragged him from the barn. Young Sam, the oldest boy, came across the yard on the dead run and snatched up a wagon brace. He and Clay bullied the animal back into the box stall and slammed the bars home in their wickets. Clay leaned in over the side of the stall and hooked a chain to the bull's nose ring. He sobbed, "I'm going to shotgun him if Davey's hurt bad."

They ran outside the barn to catch up with Old Sam. He had lifted Davey into his arms and was hurrying to the little pickup truck they used for light hauling around the farm. He said, "You drive her, Clay—you're best. We got to get him to a doctor."

Clay asked, "Is he hurt bad Pa?"

"Horned him twice, low down in the belly. I can't stop it from bleeding. Sam, you scrunch down on the floorboards and hold your hand tight on the place."

Clay got the truck started on the first spin of the starter and swerved out on the red clay road. "Lost Creek is nearest," he said. He

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crouched over the wheel and began to pick up speed.

A mile down the road Davey moaned and tried to sit up. Old Sam pushed him down. "Shush, now, boy," he soothed. Davey lay still. After a minute he said, "Don't take it out on Comanche, Pa. It was my own fault for turning my back to him."

Clay suddenly cursed and stabbed at the brake as a small green panel truck loomed ahead of them. "Durned fool," he said. "No tail light."

Sam said, "Yes, he has. Got so much mud plastered over the back end it got covered up. You got to get past him, boy."

Clay leaned on the horn. The road was narrow, with ditches on both sides, but there was room. If the truck ahead pulled way over there would be room. From the floorboard young Sam said in a shaky voice, "Clay, you got to hurry."

Ed Fratus was still obsessed with his forty dollar loss in the poker game. He had driven the miles from Ben Tulip's juke with a futile, pointless anger swelling in his chest like an inflated balloon. In his mirror he saw the lights of the Pine truck looming up behind him, then he heard the blatting of the horn. "Hah," he said, "Try it. Just go ahead and try it." He aimed for the dead center of the road and slowed down. When the blatting of the horn became more insistent he laughed and felt better. "Hell with you," he said. "Hell with *you*."

Ed Fratus, who was capable of every meanness just for the sake of meanness, who thought a turpentined dog was nearly as funny as a poisoned cat—Ed Fratus began to count the miles to Lost Creek. Seven—nearly eight. And, by God, he'd drive just as slow as he pleased, every foot of every mile.

Clay jabbed at the brakes again to keep from overrunning the car in front. "He slowed up," he said. "He's not going more than ten miles an hour now." His voice rose and he began to scream at the driver of the car ahead. "Move over," he yelled over the noise of the horn. "Move over, damn you!" If anything, the car in front went slower still.

Young Sam, from the floorboards said, "He's soaked. I can't stop it at all."

Old Sam felt the burning of impotent rage and he fought it back with effort. No time for that now. He tried to make out the license number of the car ahead but like the tail light it was stuccoed with red mud. Davey was not moving at all now. His breathing was shallow and fast. "Clay," the old man said, "You got to try it."

Clay nodded. In the dim light of the dashboard his forehead was beaded with sweat. He swung the truck to the left, at the same time stepping on the accelerator. The truck plunged ahead and nosed al-

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most alongside the vehicle in front. Clay nearly made it. Had the other car moved even an inch he would have—as it was, the left side wheels slowly, inexorably, began to slip toward the ditch. When the pickup had tipped to the point where it was in danger of overturning, Clay sobbed and turned the wheel hard left, crossing the ditch with a shuddering series of bumps and bringing the truck to a stop in a mirey field.

"I couldn't help it, Pa," he said bitterly, "She was going to roll over on us."

Old Sam said, "I know it, boy," and jumped to the ground, peeling off his coat. For a split second he paused to stare down the road where the other car was now disappearing with a raucous salute of the horn.

In fifteen minutes Old Sam and the two boys filled in a section of ditch wide enough to span the wheels of the truck. They did it with their bare hands and the terrible strength of love and desperation. Half an hour later the men stood in the anteroom of the doctor in Lost Creek and waited. It was not a long wait. The doctor, face set in the resentful expression of a man who hates to lose even a losing battle, said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Pine. He simply lost too much blood."

Old Sam's face remained impassive as he asked the doctor, "If we got him here maybe fifteen, twenty minutes earlier, could you have saved him?"

"Probably. We could have given him massive tranfusions. If he didn't go too deeply into shock—why, yes. Yes, I could have saved him."

Clay, tears streaming down his cheeks, said, "Pa, I got to go. I got to find that truck. I got to find me the man that run us off the road."

They did not find Ed Fratus that night, though they cruised every street in Lost Creek. On the way home Old Sam had Clay stop the truck near the spot where they had gone over the ditch. In the beam of the headlights he sought and found what he was looking for—tire tracks showing clearly where they had come abreast in their own truck. Two of the tires on the panel truck were fairly new and had left deep impressions in the clay; the other two were of different makes. The old man studied them, his shrewd eyes marking every minute imperfection. He grunted finally. "We'll go home now. I'll know those marks when I see them again."

On the following morning Old Sam set out in the pickup truck alone—not toward Lost Creek but in the other direction. Through his grief ran a thread of cold logic. "Don't know where he went to," he told the other boys, "but he sure came from somewhere. You take the team and go see what you can find out at Lost Creek. I'll see what I can find this way."

Half a dozen times, where side roads converged on the old tote road, he stopped and looked for

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tracks. Each time the tire marks that he had memorized the night before ran straight on by. When he came near Ben Tulip's junket, the old man frowned. "Might have been drinking," he mused. "Might have stopped on here."

He drove into Ben's place and got out of the truck. The tracks he sought were pressed deep into the clay which had begun to harden now, preserving them against the next rain.

Ben Tulip, that gaunt, bitter man, winner of half a hundred gouge fights and cutting scrapes, looked up to see Old Sam Pine and was afraid without knowing why.

Old Sam said, "Tulip, there was a green truck here yesterday—little truck, more like a sedan. Must have left here about sundown. Tulip, you tell me who was driving it."

A scrawny man at the pinball machine said, "Why, that must have been—"

Ben Tulip said fiercely, "Shut your mouth. He ain't got no right to come in here acting like he was better than anybody else."

Sam Pine, a figure out of the Old Testament and mighty in his quiet wrath, spoke to Ben Tulip in a voice that rumbled like thunder. "You tell me yourself," he said. As he spoke he reached over and closed his huge hand around Ben Tulip's wrist. Ben gasped at the pressure. "Ed Fratus," he said. "Must have been Ed Fratus."

"Where will I find him?"

"I don't know. He comes around once in a while peddling stuff from his truck. Travels all over the State. Might be back here in a week."

Old Sam released Ben's wrist. The man's hand was lard-white from lack of blood. "I'll be back here, time he comes around again." Sam glanced at the loungers in the room. "Any man that mentions I want to see him, that man will have to deal with me." Without another word he stalked from the room.

They buried young Davey on a knoll overlooking the Pine farm where five generations of Pines already slept. The day before the week was up, Old Sam stalked into Ben Tulip's juke and sat down at a corner table without speaking to any man in the place. He sat quietly throughout the afternoon and the evening so that men came into the juke and saw him and were uneasy and left. Ben Tulip brought a bottle beer to him once. The old man merely stared at him and Ben went back to the bar, taking his beer with him. When Ben closed up, Old Sam left, to return and take up his vigil the following afternoon. Just at sundown Ed Fratus walked in the door carrying his sample case.

Ben Tulip said loudly, "Evening', Ed," so that the old man would hear and know and say whatever it was that he had to say to Ed and be done with it.

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The old man stayed at his table, not even glancing at Ed. He didn't have to. If this was the man, then Clay and young Sam waiting outside, would know the green panel truck and do what they had planned to do.

Clay and young Sam had recognized the truck. From their own vehicle, pulled off the road fifty yards away from Ben Tulip's place, they saw it drive up, saw Ed Fratus get out and walk into the juke. Clay muttered, "Now we've got him. I swear, Sam, I think I got to go right up to him and beat his head in."

Young Sam put his hand on his brother's arm. "Hold it now, Clay. We agreed to do like Pa said." He rummaged on the floorboards and came up with a length of rubber tubing and a ten-gallon can. "You keep watch now. If you hear anybody coming, you whistle so I can get out of sight."

Stealthily he crept up behind Ed Fratus's truck and unscrewed the gasoline tank cap. He stuck the tubing down in the tank and sucked on it until the pungent stream of gasoline began to flow. He stuck the free end of the tube in the can and stood to one side.

After a time young Sam pulled the tube from the tank and put the cap back on. From his watching place Clay called, "How much you leave him?"

"None. All he's got left is what's in the carburetor and the fuel line and a puddle at the bottom of the tank. He won't get more than two, three miles. We'll go back in the truck now and wait for Pa."

Ed Fratus talked with Ben Tulip for perhaps half an hour before he strapped up his suitcase and walked toward the door. Old Sam Pine waited until he heard the roar of Fratus's truck before he too left without a backward glance. There was just a possibility that Fratus might notice his gas gauge before he drove away or that he might not take the tote road—but when Sam did go out into the fresh-smelling night, Fratus's truck was already vanishing into the darkness, and in the right direction. Sam strode swiftly toward his own truck where the boys waited for him.

They next saw Ed Fratus standing behind his stalled truck a scant half mile from the road that led to the Pine place. He was standing in the middle of the road, waving frantically with one hand and mopping his fat red face with the other. When they stopped he said, "Out of gas. Dirty crooks at the gas station charged me for a full tank and must have only half filled it."

Old Sam felt Clay stiffen and he put a restraining hand on his son's arm. "Well, so happens I got a full drum at my place, just west of here. Get in your car, Mister, and we'll push you. Save a trip back. Sam, you get in with the man and show him where to turn off."

When they stopped in front of the

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home place, Old Sam got out first. He said affably, "One of my boys will fill your tank, Mister. Come on in the kitchen and have a little something."

Ed Fratus said ungraciously, "All right." He followed Old Sam and Clay into the warm old kitchen and sat across from Sam at the deal table. Clay took a gallon jug down from a shelf that held two other similar jugs and poured drinks into two jelly glasses. When Ed Fratus started to drink his, Old Sam said sharply, "Hold on." He reached for one of the glasses and sniffed at it.

"Nope. It's all right." He turned to Clay. "I told you a dozen times not to keep the liquor jug on that shelf," he said. He explained to Ed Fratus. "Man from the Agricultural Extension Service left a jug of poison he wants me to try out on the bell peppers. Don't have no color or smell to it. If a man was to drink some of it accidentally he'd be dead in an hour if he didn't get to a doctor."

He turned back to Clay. "You put that poison out in the barn next time you go out that way. Either that or keep the liquor somewhere else."

Young Sam came in at the back door. "I filled up the tank," he said. I turned the engine over until it pulled gas through the line. It started up fine."

Ed Fratus finished his drink. Old Sam poured him another. Fratus asked, "What do I owe you?"

Old Sam shook his head. "Nothing. Just forget it, Mister—?"

"Fratus—Ed Fratus."

"I'm Sam Pine. These are my boys, Clay and young Sam. Had another boy, Davey. He was killed last week."

"That's too bad. What happened?"

"Bull gored him." At that moment, as if someone had goaded him, Comanche bellowed out in the barn. The sound, a deep rolling thunder, seemed to shake the house.

Ed Fratus shivered. "Hell of a thing," he said.

Old Sam nodded. "I got to take a walk out there and see what's wrong with him. Like to see him?"

"Not me." Fratus mopped his forehead again. He felt suddenly warm.

"There ain't anything wrong, Pa," Clay said. "One of the heifers is coming in season, is all."

"Then you'd better go out and see he's chained up good." Clay left the room. Old Sam picked up his glass but he didn't drink from it. "You look warm," he said. "Have a little more of this. It will soothe you down." The old man put down his own glass and poured more liquor into Fratus's glass. "I thought some of taking a shotgun to the bull," Sam continued. "It wouldn't have brought Davey back and besides it wasn't really the bull that killed him."

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Fratus was beginning to feel the liquor. He tried to focus his eyes on the old man's face. Old Sam's own eyes seemed to be burning into his own.

"If it wasn't the bull, what was was it?"

"More like a hog."

The incongruous phrase caught Fratus's attention. "A hog?" he repeated stupidly.

"Kind of a hog. Y'see, Davey was alive when we dragged him out of the barn. He was bad hurt, but he was still alive. We put him in the truck and started to Lost Creek. A doctor could have stopped him from bleeding to death."

From the barn Comanche bellowed again.

Fratus asked uneasily, "What happened then?"

Old Sam picked up his glass and put it down again, still untasted. "We came on a man driving another truck—little green truck. Clay, he signaled with the horn for the man to move over and let us by."

A thundering remembrance brought the sweat flooding to Fratus's forehead. Old Sam's eyes were burning even brighter into his own. Young Sam stood behind his father, his face impassive. A mighty fear clutched Fratus by the lungs, squeezing the breath from them. And, oh God, the bull! The old man had already tried to lure him out there once. To put him in there with that terrible animal?

Fratus mumbled, "I've got to get along now," and tried to rise on knees that buckled under him.

Old Sam said, "Hear me out, Mr. Fratus. Like I said, Clay signaled the man to move over. He didn't. He slowed down. Now all this time young Davey was bleeding to death, so Clay he had to try and get past. If the man ahead had given way maybe an inch or so, Clay would have made it. He's a fine driver. As it was, the man wouldn't move and we slid off into the ditch. But you know all about that, don't you, Fratus?"

Fratus's voice came in a cracked whisper. "You don't know it was me."

"You've already proved it, the way you look now."

"What are you going to do to me? You got no right—"

Comanche bellowed again and Fratus shattered into complete panic. "I'm going to get out of here," he shouted. "You'd better not try and stop me."

Sam Pine asked softly, "How many drinks did you have?"

Fratus stared at Old Sam's glass, still untouched, then at the two jugs on the shelf that now glistened with sinister highlights. "You poisoned me!" he cried out. Old Sam merely smiled.

They couldn't do it to him—not these rubes. An hour, the old man had said. He could get to Lost Creek in an hour easy, and find a doctor.

Ed Fratus bolted from the house

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and leaped into his truck. The keys were there. The damn fools had forgotten to take them. Try to poison him, would they? He'd show them!

He careened out onto the highway and headed toward Lost Creek. He was a half a mile down the road when he came up to another truck and he leaned on the horn, shouting, "Let me past"—as if he could make the other driver hear him if he yelled loud enough. It wasn't until the other truck slowed almost to a stop and pulled to the exact center of the road that Fratus recognized it as the one that had picked him up back near Ben Tulip's place.

He wept and implored and, finally, screamed like a madman but the truck ahead stayed on its steady, slow course.

Half an hour later Clay Pine walked into the kitchen where Old and young Sam waited for him. "He's dead," he said. "He did just like we did. When I wouldn't let him pass he tried to get by anyway. Skidded into the ditch."

Young Sam asked. "You mean, he smashed up the car and got killed?"

"Didn't get hurt at all. He tried to get the car out for a couple of minutes but he only mired it worse. Then he started running down the road toward Lost Creek. All at once he clutched at his heart and just keeled over. I stopped back and he was already gone."

Old Sam shook his head. "Fat man, heavy drinker like that, he didn't have no business running." He picked up the drink that he had not tasted while Fratus had been in the kitchen and drank it. "No use wasting good liquor," he said. "Come to think of it, Clay, where is that poison the County man left?"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JACQUELINE CUTLIP**

TITLE: ***The Black Cloud***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Sheriff Bassett

LOCALE: Willow Bend, U.S.A.

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *It was a likely day for murder—hot, dry, the rain long overdue, the crops parched, the tempers of the farmers rising, and in the air that peculiar madness which only a drought breeds . . .*

IT WAS A STRANGE SUMMER, LONG in coming and slow to leave. By the last of August we'd been without rain for four weeks, and what had started out as nothing more than a dry spell turned into a full-fledged drought.

Up in the hills the sun parched the grass to brown straw and in every field you could hear the silken hush of wind in the dying corn. Even the birds were quiet in the trees. The rain was there; you could feel and smell it pent up behind the hard blue sky, and it made one restless wondering why it didn't fall.

On Saturday afternoon I was standing by the window in my cubbyhole at the courthouse, thinking maybe things were so quiet I could hunt out a trout stream and spend the rest of the week-end fishing. I'd just unstrapped my gun belt and put it on the desk when I heard a noise in the corridor outside.

Before I could reach the door it was flung open, and I knew the trout would have to wait.

Ellabet Proudfoot stood there, one hand clutching a pair of binoculars and the other her chest. Wisps of ginger-colored hair had jolted loose from her bun and there was a glaze in her eyes. My deputy Tom was behind her.

"Shot," Ellabet gasped at last. "Shot in cold blood."

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"Get Doc Swanson, Tom," I said, staring at Ellabet's chest and wondering who in Willow Bend had finally got mad enough at her constant meddling to shoot her.

"Not me, you fool," she said, falling into my swivel chair. "Otto Haskell. Ben Keating's killed him. I saw it with my own eyes."

I started strapping my gun back on.

"Dropped," Ellabet went on, each breath coming as if it were her last. "Dropped like a stone right in his south pasture. And all the time that black cloud hovering over him like some awful omen."

It's here I blame myself. If I'd been smart enough I would have stopped her right then and there and maybe the whole thing wouldn't have happened. But next to Otto Haskell the Proudfoots were the biggest taxpayers in the county, and the only reason I was sheriff was because my father and grandfather had been the law in Willow Bend for almost a century. So I let her rattle on, missing the click as a shutter blinked in my mind to let in the picture, bright and clear.

"I was birdwatching on the cliff that overlooks the Haskell place." She eyed me warily, as if defying me to question her right to be there. Everyone knew she'd been after Otto to marry her and that her birdwatching was only a convenient term for plain, ordinary spying. "You know the place?" she snapped at me.

I knew it. You could look across the hazy range of mountains and see the corners of two other states while at your feet every nook and cranny of Willow Bend was spread like a patchwork quilt.

"Along about three o'clock Otto came out of his house, hurrying-like. He went down into the pasture and followed that cursed fence of his for a ways. He seemed to be headed for the highway, although I can't imagine why—he doesn't own a car. Anyway, I noticed this fiend stalking along his side of the fence, carrying a gun."

Tom looked up from the notes he was taking.

"You speaking of Ben Keating, Miss Proudfoot?" he asked politely.

Ellabet glared at him and for a minute I was afraid he was going to have to spit slivers of those binoculars out between some broken teeth.

"I said fiend and I *mean* fiend," she said. "It all happened so fast I couldn't believe it. There was poor Otto scurrying along and minding his own business; then he must have sensed something wrong, because he gave a look behind him and started running like the hounds of hell were at his heels."

"Did you actually see Ben point the gun at Otto, Ellabet?" I asked, as gently as I could.

She whirled in the chair, making a half circle.

"I didn't have to see it. I couldn't take my eyes off Otto. All at once,

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out of nowhere, there was this big black cloud rolling over him. I never saw anything like it in all my life." She stopped, putting twiglike fingers to her quivering mouth. "There was a shot. Otto crumpled to the ground like a wounded sparrow."

No, she hadn't waited to see more. She ran down to the road where she'd left her war-surplus jeep and made the half-hour drive to the courthouse in twenty minutes.

Tom was streaking for the door before the last words were out of Ellabet's lips. He'd been with me only a few months, and this was considerably more exciting than serving eviction papers. I heard him gunning the patrol car as I hurried out after him.

On the way to the Haskell place I sorted out what I knew about Otto Haskell and Ben Keating.

Maybe I should have seen this coming, I told myself. There'd been bad blood between the two for so long that everyone took it for granted, treating it like a joke; and most of them had forgotten what started it all in the first place.

A boundary line had caused the bad blood. People, being what they are, were bound to take sides, and Willow Bend down to the last pup had been for Otto all the way. You'd think it would be the other way around, Ben being the one who put up a fence he couldn't afford; and when Otto dragged in a surveyor and proved that a sizeable chunk of Haskell land had been chewed off in the process, Ben had to spend one entire winter moving it.

It wasn't just the fence. Ben Keating had two strikes against him from the day he set foot in the depot. First, he was never one you could get close to. More important, he hadn't been born in the town, or in the state for that matter.

He'd come down from New York City, nursing the idea that our mountain air and slow living would improve his health. No one seemed to know what was wrong with him, and no one tried to find out, because he did the worst thing a stranger wanting to make friends could have done. Without asking the advice of anyone in town he bought one of the sickliest farms in the area.

To make matters worse, he turned out to be an artist of sorts. When he wasn't tussling with the rocks that overran his land, you'd find him outside his cabin painting the trail that spiraled down the hillside. Or more likely just sitting gazing at nothing more than a honeycup swinging in the breeze.

He was an odd-looking man, dark and thin, broody around the mouth, and his eyes were a pale chilly blue. He didn't do more than pass the time of day when he came into town once a week to get his mail and tobacco, but sometimes when things were slow I would drop in at his cabin and talk a spell.

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The cabin itself was a surprise. On the outside it wasn't much, but inside there was a bright rag rug on the planked floor and a fieldstone fireplace he'd built himself. All along the walls and stacked in corners were the paintings he'd done.

"You're not a farmer," I said to him one day, examining a new one.

"No," he said. "But if I'm to stay here I have to conform—at least, I have to try."

"Aren't you ever lonely?"

He gave me a peculiar smile.

"Being alone has nothing to do with loneliness," he said. "Surely you've learned that by now."

Well, I hadn't. And neither had Willow Bend. They didn't understand people like Ben Keating, and what they didn't understand they condemned.

Now Otto Haskell was something else again. If it's true that the whole world loves a fat man, that may have been the basis of his popularity. He was as clean and pink-cheeked as a likeable baby, and a nattier dresser never passed beneath the marquee of the Bijou Theatre. He was a widower, with no closer attachment than a distant cousin in the city.

It was the ambition of every marriageable female in the county to get him into a mood sufficiently serious to offer a proposal. For a long time he played the field, cadging more free meals than a traveling preacher. Then, during the spring, I'd heard that Ellabet Proudfoot was leading the pack by a nose. There was a neat white house nestled in an apple orchard, and although he didn't have livestock, the fruits and grains he raised spilled from the rich black land like a cornucopia . . .

By the time we rattled up the steep lane and pulled into Ben Keating's front yard, half the population of Willow Bend was on our tail.

Ben was just rounding the corner of his cabin. A .22 rifle was cradled in the crook of his arm.

"There he is," Ellabet shrieked, leaping out of her jeep and thrusting a finger at him. "He's still carrying the murder weapon."

Ben glanced at the gun and then back at the crowd. I don't suppose more than two or three people had been through his gate in all the years he'd lived there, and all of them at once seemed more than he could take.

"I wouldn't use a thing like this if I wanted to murder someone, Miss Proudfoot," he said measuring us all slowly with his pale eyes.

"Tell that to the poor man lying down there in the pasture with a hole in his sweet head," she screeched, and the ones closest to her nodded in silent ominous agreement.

Ben laughed. It was a dry desolate sound.

"Sheriff Bassett, I've been shoot-

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ing groundhogs in my south tract. What's this old biddy talking about?"

"Groundhogs!" Ellabet spat, and I cut her short.

"Ben, did you shoot Otto?" I said. "Ellabet here says she saw you do just that."

He laughed again, and I didn't like it. There was something in his face I couldn't read. He handed me the .22 without my asking for it and I broke it open.

"One shot fired," I said.

"I shot at one groundhog," he said mildly. "I don't know if I hit him or not."

I told Tom to stay with Ben while Ellabet showed us where the body was.

It took some doing to hold back two-hundred-odd souls who'd never been closer to a murder scene than the pages of the *Police Gazette*. In the end it was Doc Swanson and I who followed a twitchily important Ellabet.

It was a likely day for a murder, I kept thinking—a day when tempers would rise and be as hard to control as the heat shimmering up from the fields. Off in the distance came the thin plink of a cowbell, and the only other sound was the whispery drone of the bees hovering over the dried-up clover.

"It was right here," Ellabet said, and stopped so short that Doc Swanson almost piled over her. Then she gave a wail you could have heard in the next county.

Otto Haskell's body had been there all right. The fat sprawling shape of him was imprinted on the bruised grass. He must have lain there for a while, long enough to cause the indentation. But the body wasn't there now. All that was left to testify he had been there at all was a trail through the field that looked as if something heavy had been dragged for 20 or 30 feet.

A few steps away, trampled under the grass, I found a white square of handkerchief with several small spots of blood on it. I picked it up and put it in an envelope. The land was flat and we could see all about us. There was nothing there at all except a big lightning-split oak stretching its dead limbs to the heat-struck sky.

Doc Swanson stared at me as if I were somehow responsible for it all.

"A man doesn't disappear into thin air, Sheriff," he said. "Least, not a man of Otto's proportions."

"I knew it," Ellabet started. "Ben dragged him off and buried him somewhere while I was in town."

"It takes a spell to bury a man," I said, a shade harsher than I intended, because the same idea had crossed my mind. "You couldn't bury Otto under three inches of soil, and the ground's as dry and hard as flint."

She turned on me like a mother hen who'd had her only chick snatched from under her. "He's probably had this planned for a

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long time, and you know it. You're just standing here and Otto may be lying in some bushes somewhere bleeding to death."

But he wasn't. And that's where the whole case took on the aspects of a nightmare.

Hill folks tend to clan together when there's trouble, and this was the biggest slice of it they'd seen in a 'coon's age. We went back and formed searching parties. We scoured the cornfields and the orchards and the hills back of both farms until dusk stopped us.

Ben Keating sat on the front porch of his cabin watching, his pale eyes like two stones in his emotionless face.

"You're wasting your time," he said when I stopped long enough for a drink of water from his well. "You're not going to find him."

"Don't be too sure," I told him, trying my best not to get mad. The way I had it figured, his life would be in my hands when the crowd wearied of looking for Otto's body.

"I'm positive." He was grinning, but for the first time there was fear behind the grin. "I don't know what this is all about. I haven't had anything to do with Haskell since the fence trouble."

The sun was down and it was still warm as noon. Shadows began to stretch their lengths on the ground. The trees stirred with restless small breezes. We could hear the low angry voices of the searchers coming back, and I didn't have to use much persuasion to convince Ben he would be a lot safer in my room behind the jail.

We slipped out to the patrol car and on the drive back to town I reminded him that laymen weren't always right in believing a body had to be produced before you could be convicted of murder.

"Willow Bend has already tried and convicted me of a lot of things," he said darkly. "But you know I couldn't kill anyone."

I didn't answer him. I didn't want to get my own emotions mixed up with my duties.

On Sunday morning, by the grace of Ellabet's tongue on the telephone, the disappearance of Otto Haskell was plastered in inch-high headlines across all the county papers. The next day being Monday, and with nothing much else to write about, the story made its way to the AP wires.

That afternoon a steady influx of traffic began to come into Willow Bend. It started innocently enough with a little foreign car and two smart-aleck reporters from the city who weren't dry behind the ears. They made it to the town limits where their car broke down. They rescued a camera and a bottle of Scotch and hitched a ride in a jeep —a jeep that just happened to be driven by Ellabet Proudfoot.

I don't know what she told them, but after that the newspaper people came in droves. Big fast-talking men and even a couple of women

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who wanted a picture of Ben and the place where Otto's body had lain. About the first, I put my foot down, explaining that Ben wasn't under arrest yet; as for the second, I couldn't have stopped them with an elephant gun.

It seemed that Otto, who'd never been very important in life, was now the prime target of every man, woman, and child able enough to lift up a suspicious-looking log. They dug in every place where fresh dirt had been turned over in the past six months, and in the end they even drained the wells. By the time they had given up, the land was tortured and worthless-looking.

And still no sign of the body.

That night Willow Bend decided to take the law into its own hands and make Ben Keating talk.

It was a rich, blue, breathless kind of dark. The tattered shreds of a moon were caught in the Baptist steeple; and there was an air of great calm over the land. It was no night for a lynching.

I'd heard rumors all day. Doc Swanson and Ben made a farce of playing poker in my office while Tom and I kept a nervous watch at the windows. As soon as I caught sight of the torches wavering down Main Street I turned to Ben.

"You'd save us a lot of trouble if you'd just tell us where you hid Otto," I said. "That's all they want right now—to give the poor man a decent burial."

Ben shook his head, but there was only the ghost of the old arrogance in his laughter.

"I tell you, the last I saw of Haskell he was running toward the highway. He was alive then. I didn't see him fall and I didn't see any black cloud."

For a minute I almost believed him. But only for a minute. I pointed to a cell. He shrugged and went in without a word.

They came into the courthouse quadrangle muttering under their breaths, as men will do at times like that—as though they were ashamed of what they were doing but would fight to the death for their right to do it.

"There's nigh onto a hundred of us, Sheriff," someone called. "Don't make us no trouble."

"There'll be no trouble," I said amiably, stepping out on the stoop to face them.

It would be a lie to say I wasn't afraid. Here I was, almost 60, and I hadn't fired the .38 Special at my hip for longer than I cared to remember. I knew if worse came to worst I'd be tempted to sacrifice Ben Keating and his hard-headedness before I lifted a gun against one of my neighbors.

I tried talking them out of it. I had a gift of gab that had stood the test of time and at least ten Republican state conventions; but they wanted none of it this night.

"He'll stand there and talk until dawn if you let him," someone called, and I knew Ellabet was there

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somewhere, hanging onto the fringe of the crowd even though it was strictly a man-meeting.

Tom came out to stand beside me. I could feel the tautness, the odd eagerness for danger that only the very young have, and I put a warning hand on his arm.

They stood like soldiers, or more like machines. Their faces were gray blobs in the eerieness of the torchlight, and their eyes were filled with deadly purpose.

"Now," Tom said quietly, more to himself than to me, and I heard the click of the hammer on his gun. Those in the front ranks heard it too. They hesitated, but only for a heartbeat. There was not a weapon among them. They had something more powerful. It was the wildness, the sickness you have in the pit of your stomach when you're on a deer stand at dawn on a cold November morning, or waiting hip-deep in mud for ducks to settle on the chapped surface of a lake.

Only now it was a man they wanted.

"Get Keating out here," one of them yelled.

A movement ran through the crowd, as though they'd all sighed at the same time, and I braced myself. But nothing happened. They were all staring at a point behind Tom and me. When I turned, Doc Swanson was standing in the door, his arms hanging loosely at his sides.

"All of you go home," he said. "Ben's dead."

For a minute I thought someone had slipped around back and got to Ben, or maybe that he'd managed to get a knife and killed himself. After Tom and I had barred the door and followed Doc inside, we saw it was neither.

Ben was lying on the cot in the cell, the darkness all eased from his face. I saw that he'd been younger than I thought, and I wondered if loneliness could age a man.

"We were fools," Doc Swanson said, turning his back on us and staring out the window. "The man had a bad heart. He didn't tell me until just a few minutes ago. This thing tonight was all he could take. I sat right here three feet from him, and he was gone before I could reach out."

We stared at one another. I don't suppose any of us liked the thoughts going through our minds.

"If a man had a bad heart it's not likely he'd carry or even lug a two-hundred pounder like Otto very far," Tom said after a while.

"It's not likely," Doc said, and left by the back way.

Tom went to tell the crowd. They didn't believe him. They stayed there until two of them had come in and seen for themselves. Then the torches began to sputter and break apart, going back into the hills like wandering fireflies.

There was only a handful of us at Ben's funeral.

We buried him on a stretch of tableland not far from his cabin.

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The mountains lay beyond, as far as the eye could see and farther, hazed from dawn to dusk with the smoky blueness Ben had managed to put into all his pictures. Below sloped a field of wild honeycups. I chose the spot, not really knowing why, but thinking somehow that Ben would like it.

But something bothered me all the way back to the office. It was a small thing at first, just a persistent nagging unease, but it wouldn't let me alone.

"I'm going out to the Haskell place," I said to Tom the next morning.

He shrugged. To him the excitement was over and the whole matter finished. Otto's bones would turn up somewhere, sometime; and Ben was dead. An eye had been taken for an eye, and now all was well. Yet something kept scratching like chalk on the slate of my mind.

The day was hot and clear. My uniform stuck to my back and it took me a long time to walk from the locked-up house to the place where we'd found the blood-spotted handkerchief. Nothing had changed, except now the mangled ground was covered with a fine white dust. I stared out over the baked land, and all at once I remembered Ellabet's black cloud.

During the search and all that followed, I'd forgotten about the black cloud. It could have been hysteria, I knew, but whatever Ellabet was, she wasn't a liar. She had seen the cloud, yet there had been none that day, nor any since. The sky had been a polished azure blue for weeks, a drought sky; yet she had seen a cloud that moved above Otto's head.

Up in the sky two buzzards wheeled. They made lazy wide circles, coming closer to the ground with each glide. I watched them, telling myself the carrion would be plentiful now—animals from the hills dying of thirst, a calf caught in a crevice. I made my way toward them slowly. They settled near the rail fence, eyeing me beadily.

Then I saw what they had seen. It was a groundhog, fat and ugly-looking, swollen twice its normal size. I judged it had been dead at least three days, and even from where I stood I could see the small bullet hole in its head.

So Ben had been telling the truth about the groundhog. But Otto was still missing. If he hadn't been shot he'd been disposed of in some other way, quickly and thoroughly, and by now there was no doubt in my mind about his being dead. No farmer walks away from a farm before his corn's been harvested, not even during a drought.

I walked slowly back toward the highway, following the steps that Otto had taken on his last walk. I stopped once to take out my handkerchief and wipe my head, and something hit me so hard I had to put out an arm to keep from falling.

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And then the truth was in front of me, so plain I could have laughed. Only now there was nothing to laugh about. The tragedy of it was as stark and real as the sered soil that covered Ben Keating's grave.

The tree was there, the big lightning-split oak that we had searched around and under and had never really seen—and on it was the cloud of death.

Two days later Otto Haskell walked into my office. I'd known he would come sooner or later, so it was no surprise. He slammed the door hard and for a second the stillness was so tight you could hear the squeak of his narrow tan shoes as he walked across the room.

"Well, Otto?" I said.

"Well, yourself, Sheriff," he growled, planting his palms flat on my desk. I wished Tom would close his mouth, because he knew full well there'd never been a ghost that well-nourished. Or that mad. "I just got into town and I want to know what happened to my farm. My south pasture looks like the White Sands Proving Grounds, and I tell you someone's going to pay for it, yes, sir!"

"You're supposed to be dead, Mr. Haskell," Tom said. "Don't you read the newspapers?"

Otto looked around for a chair. I got up and let him have mine. His face was doughy and his fat fingers twitched aimlessly at his boiled collar. He started to say something when Ellabet Proudfoot flew through the door and clutched him by the lapels.

"Otto, honey," she panted. "Someone said they saw you come in here. You mean Ben didn't hurt you when he shot you?"

Otto disengaged himself and brushed off his suit.

"I swear I never dreamed a little visit to the city could cause this much fuss," he said. "I don't know what any of you are talking about. It seemed a good time to go, this dry spell and all, and there wasn't much I could do about the place. It does seem like a man could go off and get married in peace without the whole county having a conniption fit."

"Married," Ellabet screeched, shivering away from him as if he'd caught some terrible disease in the city. *"Married!"*

"You deaf or something, Miss Proudfoot?" Tom said, and I gave him a look.

Otto took out a clean white handkerchief and mopped his pink skull. Then he pointed out the window to a car parked across the street in front of the post office. It was a new convertible, and there was a slip of a girl sitting in it. Her hair was as yellow as Otto's Country Gentlemen roasting ears in mid-July.

I was beginning to see why he'd left in such a hurry. A man who is about to turn over a new leaf doesn't tarry around to make erasures on the old pages. And once

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you thought of it, he probably didn't know what had been happening in Willow Bend—a man doesn't usually bother with newspapers on his honeymoon. A new car, a new wife, a new life for Otto Haskell . . . and nothing for Ben Keating who dreamed away on his hill.

"But I saw," Ellabet sort of moaned. She was wringing her thin hands, and there was a strange sadness in the gesture. "I saw Ben Keating point the gun in your direction. I heard the shot. I saw you fall." She turned to me, pleading. "I saw that, Sheriff—I swear to you I did!"

"I believe you," I said. "I know about the black cloud too."

Otto looked dazed. Then he snapped his fingers.

"The bees," he said. "Those confounded bees. I had to be in the city before five so I could pick up the marriage license. I was already in a swivet because I'd cut myself in half a dozen places while I was shaving. Finally I was dressed and ready to catch the bus that goes by. I was almost to the highway when I heard the swarm coming." He paused. "I'm sensitive to stings, you know. It puts me in bed with a fever for days, and I couldn't chance a thing like that happening. I don't know where they came from, or why they were swarming, unless it was dryness and they were crazy for water."

There could have been a lot of reasons, I thought. The clover crop had been bad, or their hives poorly ventilated. Maybe they'd had a premonition that they would perish if they stayed, and had chosen that hour, that instant, to go out. It was easy to see how Ellabet had thought it was a cloud—the black clusters of them hanging above Otto's head, rising and falling in their straight flight toward the lowermost limb of the oak tree.

"You saw Ben walking his side of the fence with a gun," I prodded. "Didn't that scare you?"

Otto spread his pink hands. "That wasn't unusual. I even heard a shot. I didn't pay it any mind because just then I saw the bees." He studied the crease in his pants. "Ben and I weren't speaking, you know."

I nodded, and he went on.

"The right thing to do when you get caught in a swarm is to lay down and stay put till they're settled. But I couldn't stay put long—I was in a mighty big hurry." He looked at us all suspiciously. "There was nothing wrong in that, was there?"

I felt sick, as if a mirror had been turned toward me in the thick moving heat to show me something terrible that wasn't Otto Haskell, but myself, and Ellabet, and the rest of the townspeople.

"No," I said. "No, I guess not. Most of us are in a mighty big hurry about lots of things."

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Herewith one of the alter egos of the famous TV star, Steve Allen . . . presenting a murder story with a modus operandi so new that it should frighten the police out of their collective wits . . . ah, this modern world and the ingenious mind of man!

MURDER À LA HOLLYWOOD

by STEVE ALLEN

THE POLICE ARE NOT SURPRISED when, in connection with a highly publicized murder that has gone unsolved, a number of people come forth to confess to the crime.

It is, on the other hand, unusual if not unknown for a man to confess to having committed a murder when beyond the shadow of a doubt a suicide rather than a killing was involved. That is why nobody paid any attention to Walt Swanson when he said he had murdered David Starbuck.

Starbuck killed himself in the bathroom of his palatial Palm Springs home on the night of September 14th. There were at least 30 people who knew that Swanson had spent that night at the bar of the Villa Loma, a spaghetti-and-rendezvous joint on the Sunset Strip.

The door of Starbuck's toilet was locked from the inside. He had slashed his wrists, stretched out on the pink tile floor with a folded bathmat under his head, and died almost peacefully. As one wag said when Swanson first confessed that *he* had cut Starbuck's wrists, although it was clearly established that he had been in Beverly Hills on the night in question, "Must have had a mighty long razor."

The police spent a little time checking Swanson's story, marked him as a psycho, and told him to get lost. I guess I'm the only one who knows that he was telling the truth after all, because I listened to the *whole* story.

To say that Starbuck was not widely admired is to win the understatement championship of any year. The movie business is never short of phonies but Dave was the champ. He came out here in the late Thirties with a reputation as a hot-shot salesman and there was always the vague idea that he had *had* to come West, that something he had been involved in in the East had not been strictly on the up and up. The idea was founded on bedrock. Dave had got into the habit of selling things he didn't own. In Hollywood he soon found that this

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trick could be valuable. First he palmed himself off as a writer, sold a book he hadn't written, stole half the profits from the poor bum who did write it, wangled a share of the production arrangement, and found himself with a smash on his hands. From there on in there was no stopping him.

By 1945 he was second in command at World-American, living in Bel Air with his fourth wife, and climbing fast by reason of his shrewd and ruthless ability to manipulate men with big talent and small guts.

But I am getting ahead of myself, as they say. Let's go back a wife or two. We never knew just who Dave was married to back East. She never made the trip. He stole his second woman from Walt Swanson. Nobody but the old-timers remember much about Walt now, but in his time he was the greatest cameramen of them all. Some of the old stars wouldn't make a picture without him. Eventually he started directing and he would have made a fine director except that he began belting the bottle. Charming as he was sober, he was a mean drunk. They put up with his bats for a couple of years but eventually the word got around that hiring him for a picture meant added costs in lost shooting time. He never had a prayer after that. Well, no, he did have one chance. Dave Starbuck hired him for a picture and made a rather peculiar deal with him.

"Walt," Dave said, "here's the arrangement. Nobody else in town will hire you because you're a stewbum, right? Here's my offer. I'll give you your regular price for this picture and you get it the day we're through shooting, in one lump. Unless you start drinking. The first day you're drunk on the set the money drops to 50 per cent. If you pull it a second time you get 25 per cent. Take it or leave it."

Walt took it. You have to eat.

The third week of shooting Starbuck hired an out-of-work writer to take Walt to lunch and get him loaded. Then he came around to the set after lunch, walked up to Swanson, smiled broadly, smelled Walt's breath, and said, "Cheer up, baby. At fifty per cent you're still being overpaid." Walt's ego being what it was, he went on a week's bender. Starbuck threatened to throw him off the picture. Eventually he paid him peanuts and kicked him out. In desperation Walt sent his wife around to plead for a break.

"Listen, sweetie," Dave said, "what do you want from me? We made a deal."

"But Dave," Swanson's wife said, "Walt's having a rough time. He did a good job for you, didn't he?"

Dave looked at Swanson's wife. She had good legs and was years younger than Walt.

"Listen, Myrna," he said, "doesn't it make you feel sorta cheap to have to go around town begging for

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handouts for a has-been like Walt? You deserve better than that. You're a looker. I happen to know you have talent. You should be acting again. Whaddaya say we forget about the deal Walt and I made? It's all over. He made his bed. Let him lie in it. But let's say you have a small part in my next picture, at pretty good money. Now how's that?"

Well, when you're a former call girl, when you'd love to do a little picture work, when you're married to a man 20 years your senior, and when you married him in the first place just because you were tired and he offered some place to rest, a pitch like Starbuck's is pretty hard to resist. To spare the painful details, within six months Myrna had left Walt and moved in with Dave.

That did it. Walt was no good after that. Never directed another picture. It must have been about that time that he first thought of killing Starbuck. He wasn't the first, of course, nor the only one, but he must have been head of the club.

The philosophers tell us that when you lust after a woman in your heart, or long to commit a murder, you're already on record, even if you never get to realize your ambition. On that basis I guess quite a few of us around town are guilty of the murder of David Starbuck. But here's how Walt Swanson did it.

By 1955 he was all washed up as a director, although Alcoholics Anonymous had put him back in one physical piece for the time being. To pay for the booze he had sold everything he had and now to keep eating he had to take any odd job he could get. An old friend eventually landed him a spot with Consolidated Film Service, a subsidiary of the Consolidated Studio, that did film exchange work. For example, when a wealthy producer wanted to go to the movies, well, it didn't work out that way. The movies went to him. His secretary just called the film exchange, ordered a certain picture, or maybe a double feature, and the films were shipped to the producer's home, to be shown in his private projection room, for his private pleasure. Walt Swanson thought it was a pretty grim joke the first time he got an order to ship a can of film to Starbuck's Bel Air pleasure-dome.

Then one day he learned that Starbuck had an ulcer. A snatch of conversation overheard at a restaurant and Walt's own stomach tingled in a momentary frenzy of vengeful glee. So Dave Starbuck could be hurt after all, if only by his conscience, his own fears. At the time that Walt noted this fact he did not file it away with any conscious realization that eventually he would be able to call it out, to employ it. It was just something he heard about and was glad about, and that was that.

The catalyst was dropped into the seething caldron of his mind a year later when he read a story in the

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Hollywood Reporter about subliminal advertising. A theater in New Jersey had cut into a motion picture film some commercial announcements that flashed on the screen too quickly to be seen consciously but, according to the theory, not too quickly to transmit to the eye and the subconscious mind an impression which subsequently would suggest action to the individual. In the test case the action suggested was the purchase of a particular soft drink. Sales of the drink increased markedly on the night of the test.

It was after reading that story that Walt Swanson began to get even with David Starbuck. At first the idea of murder was not actually in his mind. He only wanted to hurt, to lash out, to avenge himself. The first thing he did was to print up two small cards, using white ink on black paper. One card said, *Dave Starbuck, you stink*. The other one said, *Everybody hates David Starbuck*. Then he borrowed a hand-operated movie camera from a friend, shot stills of the two cards, clipped out the film frames, put them into his wallet, and waited.

Within a week Starbuck's secretary called to order a picture. When Walt received the shipping slip he got the film out of the vault, set it up on spools, scissored a line, and inserted one of the still frames he had shot at home. Twenty minutes farther along on the reel he slipped in the second insert.

The picture was a comedy, but that night after running it Dave Starbuck didn't feel amused. A certain insensitivity had always been part of his make-up, but faced even subconsciously with the knowledge that he was actively disliked, and being at the same time unable to erect any of his customary defenses, he became vaguely depressed.

Swanson at first, and for a long time afterward, had no sure way of knowing how effective his attack was; but eventually he began to pick up stray bits of information that convinced him that he was striking telling blows. Column items about suddenly planned vacations, rumors about physical check-ups, stories about angry blowups in conference rooms. And only Swanson knew the reason. Once a week for a whole year he sent his invisible arrows into Starbuck's hide. *Starbuck, you're no good.*

Dave, you're a heel.

Starbuck, you're sick.

And every Monday when the film would come back to the exchange, Walt would scissor out his inserts and patch up the reel, leaving no evidence.

Starbuck, your wife despises you!

David Starbuck is a jerk!

Starbuck, you are the lowest of the low.

Starbuck's irritation increased to the point where he became careless about his attitude toward his superiors, and in Hollywood no matter how high up you are, you have to

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answer to somebody: chairmen of the board, stockholders' groups. One night at a party he told the head of his studio's New York office to go to hell. From that moment he started to slide downhill, although at first his speed was so slow nobody was quite sure he was moving.

It was about that time that Swanson aimed his *coup de grâce*. The next time Starbuck had a picture run off he received this message: *Dave, why don't you kill yourself?*

The following week it was: *Kill yourself, Dave. It's the only way out.*

Starbuck put up with eight weeks of it. He began to fall apart. Having no friends to sympathize with him, he went from bad to worse fast. Then one day he went to Palm Springs, spent all afternoon lying in the sun by his swimming pool, got drunk, went into the bathroom, locked the door, lay down on the pink tile floor, folded the fluffy lamb's-wool bath mat under his head, slashed his wrists with a single-edged razor, and bled to death, slowly, lying still.

After it happened Walt began drinking again. I wouldn't be telling the story now except that, as some of you may know, poor Walt got careless with a cigarette one night in the lab and burned himself up along with a hell of a lot of film. A few weeks before the end he told me the story one night at the Villa Loma bar.

Good thing Walt didn't work in a TV film lab.

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Manchester, William	CAIRO INTRIGUE	25¢	Aug. 15	Pocket Books	R
Manor, Jason	THE GIRL IN THE RED JAGUAR	35¢	Aug. 18	Popular Library	Reissue
Queen, Ellery	CAT OF MANY TAILS	35¢	Aug. 15	Pocket Books	Reprint: Reissue
Rice, Craig & McBain, Ed	THE APRIL ROBIN MURDERS	35¢	Aug. 18	Dell	R
Stern, Richard	SUSPENSE!	35¢	Aug. 25	Ballantine	O
Stout, Rex	IF DEATH EVER SLEPT	35¢	Aug. 1	Bantam Books	R
Tey, Josephine	THE DAUGHTER OF TIME	35¢	Aug. 27	Berkley Books	R
Tomerlin, John	RETURN TO VIKKI	25¢	July 30	Gold Medal (Fawcett)	O
Whittington, Harry	STRANGE BARGAIN	35¢	Aug. 18	Avon	O
Woody, William	MISTRESS OF HORROR HOUSE	35¢	Aug. 5	Ace Books	O

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

THE FORGOTTEN CLASSICS OF MYSTERY (Juniper) is a project admirable in concept, unsatisfactory in execution. Typography and editing are sub-professional, and too much of the "forgotten" material is available elsewhere; but the high average quality, the generous wordage and the occasional truly forgotten masterpiece make the series recommended . . . if somewhat reluctantly. So far published ($2.95 each; paper $1.45): AN OMNIBUS OF AMERICAN MYSTERIES and collections of Wilkie Collins, R. L. Stevenson and Sheridan Le Fanu.

More modern classics revived: 4 stories (novels and novelets, 1914-1942) about Mary Roberts Rinehart's nurse detective Hilda Adams in MISS PINKERTON (Rinehart, $3.95); the first 3 novels (1956) about Ed McBain's precinct detectives, for the first time in hard covers as THE 87TH PRECINCT (Simon & Schuster, $3.95).

★★★★ **THE WATCHER, by Dolores Hitchens** (Crime Club, $2.95)

Long-satisfactory writer reaches new heights in suspense-study of psychopathic terror, Millar-like both in human quality and in skilled deception.

★★★★ **SEVEN STEPS EAST, by Ben Benson** (Mill-Morrow, $2.95)

Benson's death last April is as tragic a loss as the modern American detective novel has sustained. This posthumous book (the first, thank God, of three) will show you why—as if you didn't already know.

★★★ **MALICE MATRIMONIAL, by Joan Fleming** (Washburn, $2.95)

Deft, ironic, shrewdly plotted tale of marriage and murder in London's world of dressmaking de luxe.

★★★ **MURDER IS MY SHADOW, by Chandler Hunt** (Macmillan, $2.95)

Fresh, likable debut: attractive non-idiot heroine, lively pursuit-suspense, vivid Mexican and border background.

Muriel Spark's MEMENTO MORI (Lippincott, $3.95) may not belong strictly in our field; but like her ROBINSON (1958), this wondrously witty and wise fable of old age and death is a striking specimen of the use of mystery-detective techniques in the literary novel.

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Mr. Mathieson has made good his staggering promise—to turn famous figures of history into detectives . . . The first in the series transformed the explorer Captain Cook into a shipboard criminologist in the South Pacific. Then the fabulous Leonardo da Vinci solved a most baffling "locked room" mystery. Next we witnessed the deductive powers of Defoe, creator of Robinson Crusoe. And most recently, Hernando Cortez, the conqueror of old Mexico, cleverly unmasked the murderer of Montezuma . . . Truly, as we have mentioned before, the "hitherto unchronicled" exploits of "The Great Detectives."

And now the tale of Alexander the Great in which the king himself investigates a poisoning of momentous import . . .

And soon to appear in EQMM a previously unrecorded episode in the life and times of Don Miguel de Cervantes, creator of Don Quixote . . .

ALEXANDER THE GREAT, DETECTIVE

by THEODORE MATHIESON

I, JOLAS OF PHILIPPI, RETURNED TO Babylon on the first day of the month of Hecatombaeon bearing a heavy heart and fearing lest the word I carried from our homeland, Macedonia—whereunto I had gone at the express wish of my dearest friend Alexander—should make my king turn against me. I left the caravan, with which I had travelled so many weary stadia through the steppes of Asia, in the western part of the city, and crossing the Euphrates by means of the ferry, went at once to my house by the edge of the palace gardens.

From my servant Bessus, who was exceedingly glad to see me, I learned that the city had the previous day held a great festival to celebrate Alexander's planned campaign against the coasts of Arabia. He was to leave Babylon in five days with the fleet under the command of Nearchus, and I knew I had come barely in time to tell the king my news.

With many sighs for what lay before me, I bathed briefly and put on clean garments and sandals, for the opportunities for bathing upon my journey had been few, and I knew that no matter how glad Alexander would be to see me again, except when he was upon the battlefield, he was most fastidious about the cleanliness of those about him.

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I went then to the palace, passing the guards at Ishtar Gate who gave me familiar greeting, and ascended the steep stairway to the great terrace. There I learned the king was preparing for his bath, so upon the decision to surprise him I went at once to the lavacre, which was as yet deserted, although the warm water in the deep pool steamed invitingly in the evening air.

Sitting upon a bench beside the bath, surrounded by the paraphernalia for vigorous exercise, I played musingly with a ball until I heard footsteps, and then considering my activity unseemly in view of the portentous news I had to impart, I threw the ball aside.

Shortly thereafter Alexander himself entered with his attendants, and when he saw me, his joy was great.

"My thoughts have been with thee constantly, Jolas," said he, embracing me. "Since dear Hephaestion died, I have been quite lonely, and I waited eagerly for thy return."

Indeed, although Alexander was a big man, compared with myself who am slight but agile in the games, he was so well proportioned and carried himself with such grace that one felt not overwhelmed by his proximity. His features were strong and proud, with a fresh pink color to his skin that Apelles, who painted Alexander holding lightning in his hand, did not accurately reproduce, making him somewhat black and swarter than his face indeed was.

Alexander disrobed and descended the tile steps into the pool, where he swam as we talked casually and I told him of the rigors of the journey and its adventures, but did not touch upon the burden of my intelligence, which he seemed unwilling to hear knowledge of. Whenever our talk verged upon the serious he would start cavorting like an aquatic mammal, disappearing beneath the surface, and rising again to cough with the access of water into his mouth.

When he had done this thrice, I rose concerned and said, "Wilt thou hear now what news I bear, Alexander?"

He looked reproachfully at me, but left the pool and, motioning away the attendants who came to anoint him with oil, put on his gown. Then he signalled me to follow him and we went to his chambers. There he dismissed his servants and stood looking at me with a frown.

"Thou hast ill news for me about Antipater?" he asked at last, with a flicker of suspicion in his eye. I knew Alexander feared the growing power of his regent in Macedonia; that is why he had sent me to discover how affairs went in the home country.

"Not about Antipater," said I, "but from him. Antipater is loyal to thee, Alexander, and governs as thou wouldst. But he sends this

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news: Leanarchus, governor of Phrygia, has engaged mercenaries and is occupied in plundering Thrace, and boasts of descending upon Macedonia itself!"

"Cannot Antipater deal with this traitor as he deserves?" Alexander demanded.

"He has already put soldiers into the field against Leanarchus, and no doubt will be successful. But that is not the worst. Leanarchus, as thou knowest, is uncle of Medius, thy captain of the Macedonian forces here in Babylon. It is upon Medius's strategic skill thou wilt depend for conquest of Arabia. And yet, Antipater wishes to inform thee that Leanarchus has spoken of his nephew's desire to rule all Asia in thy place. Leanarchus has hinted that Medius heads a plot to assassinate thee. I prayed I would return in time to bear thee this news."

Alexander's face and chest grew red, as they always do when he falls into a rage and he turned upon me as if I were his adversary.

"By the divine fury of Bacchus! I do not believe Antipater. *I trust Medius!* Together we have fought five years from the Hindu Kush to the Great Ocean. 'Twas he who saved me from death at the siege of Multan when I received this!" Alexander touched the scar upon his breast. "With the help of Medius's ingenuity we have rebuilt the phalanx, which we shall use with crushing effect against the Arabians. We have planned our victory side by side—he is like a very brother to me. I love him not less than I have loved thee, Jolas—until thou came to me with such impossible news!"

It was as I had feared. Alexander, my dearest friend, had turned against me at my words. I shrugged and made obeisance and turned to leave the chamber, but Alexander stopped me by smiting his hand into his palm.

"Stay, Jolas," he said, less wildly. "Thou must give me time to think." But even as I turned there came a knock upon the door and Medius himself entered. He is a heavy-set, plethoric man, with a weighty chin and a forehead that bulges aggressively over deep and canny eyes. Because Alexander favors me, Medius also shows a liking which I am sure he does not feel.

"Welcome back to Babylon, Jolas," said he, touching me. "I come to fetch Alexander to a private drinking bout, but if he is willing, thou must join us as well."

"Yes, dear Jolas," Alexander said with his customary affection. "Do join us. We drink again to the health of the Gods but talk of the exaltation of mortals through the conquest of Arabia!"

"Thank thee, Alexander," I said, "but I am weary with many days of travel. With thy permission I shall return home."

"Of course, thou must be tired,"

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Alexander said. "Come tomorrow at noonday, and we shall talk further of—Antipater."

I bowed and left the chamber, and at my last look at Alexander he was frowning at Medius.

But Alexander did not wait until mid-day for my visit. Next morning as I stood upon my balcony watching the shadows vanish upon the terra cotta bosom of the Euphrates, a messenger brought me a letter from him, telling me to put all business asunder and hasten to his side at once, as he had urgent need of me.

I returned to the palace, and within the vast reception chamber —from whose windows one can see past the fertile greenery that lines the Euphrates into the blank desert beyond—I found Alexander lying upon a couch.

At once he arose and spake to his attendants, telling them to leave him, and when we were alone he sat upright upon the couch and with a sigh covered his face with his hands. When he drew them away I was shocked to see how ravaged was his visage, and wondered at his great will power that hid what must be intense suffering from the eyes of his court.

Then he stepped down from the dais and clapped his hands upon my shoulder.

"Oh, thou bosom friend of Hephaestion, who once quarrelled with him how much thou loved me more than he, I need now thy help in my extreme moment!"

His hand upon my shoulder burned with fever, and his words came in unsteady gusts, as if he drew breath with painful difficulty. I could see the gleam of fever behind the swart steadiness of his eye, and smell the good savor of his body which always clung like incense about him.

"I am ever thy faithful servant, dear Alexander," I said.

"Yes, I trust thee. And therefore thou must know, and no one else—*that I have been poisoned, and am dying.*

The fervent words that sprang to my lips he stemmed by upraised hand, while with the other he withdrew his ring with which he sealed his letters, and pressed it firmly against my lips.

"Thus thou must swear to keep silent," he said.

"I swear," I said, when Alexander removed the seal.

"Listen then, Jolas," spake my king, sinking in sudden lassitude upon the couch. "Last night, as thou knowest, Medius came to carry me off to a drinking bout in Nearchus's chambers in the palace. There were only four of us—Medius, Nearchus, Susa the Persian treasurer, and myself. The chamber was guarded without, and no one entered nor left the whole time; we poured wine for one another as we listeth, and we quaffed greatly, for the wine was sweet. If I had not

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dulled my palate I would have complained sooner of the sudden bitter cup that was poured me, but it was near daybreak and my senses were lulled; as it was, I drained it all but a third, and then remembering with a sudden stab what thou had said, I demanded to know why I was served bitter vintage, and cried treason in my cup. Nearchus said he had served me, and that I did but taste the dregs of the flagon. Medius, whom I accused, picked up the very cup and himself drained the remainder. That calmed me, and I forgot my accusations until this morning. But while I knelt at the sacrifice within the temple, I felt a flush come over me, and later when I tried to write in my journal, I felt weak and faint. I knew then that I had been poisoned."

"Perhaps it is some passing ague that thou feelest," I said, but Alexander shook his head.

"Nay, Jolas, because I know this poison well. When Calisthenes languished in his prison at my command, I had him given it myself and watched the progress thereof. It waits from six to eight hours to make itself felt, and then one is taken with fever, which grows day by day for six days, until the life has been burned away. See, it is a poison I myself carry ever with me should I be taken captive!"

He seized his sword and pressed a spot upon the silver hilt close to the haft, and I beheld a lid suddenly spring open, revealing tiny white crystals within.

"It is gathered as liquid, and is formed into crystals which are cold to the touch.* Knowest thou of this poison, Jolas?"

"Nay, Alexander," said I.

"It is that which was put into my cup last night," said he. "And if Medius had not drained the remainder I would have had him quartered at the first flush in my cheek!"

"But perhaps you drank with him earlier in the day, Alexander," I said. "It would not be unusual."

"True. But for two days I have fasted to the Gods for a successful expedition to Arabia. *Neither food nor drink has passed my lips in all that time until I went to drink with Medius last night.* Nay, Jolas, as certain am I of the time of my poisoning as that I am Alexander."

He closed the little receptacle, and held his sword over his knee, his hand gripping the hilt. Then with an access of violent energy he rose and swept down from his dais, swinging his sword as if at an imaginary enemy, and I withdrew for safety to an alcove while he raved.

"Would that I could kill them, all three!" he shouted. "Then I would

* Plutarch, Alexander's biographer, tells that this poison falls as liquid from a rock in the territory of the city of Nonacris, where it is gathered as they would gather dew, into the horn of the foot of an ass, for there is no other kind of thing (except silver) that will keep it.

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be sure of punishing my assassin! There was a time I would have done it! But not now. I must at the last use stealth, and pusillanimous *investigation* to discover the culprit, for the power of Macedonia must not be weakened, and each one of those men is part of the keystone in the arch of that power!"

"But Medius," I insisted, "has he shown signs of poisoning also?"

Alexander straightened and breathed deeply, and when he spake his voice was calm, and I knew his mind had gained control. "He was here just now. I had a servant feel of his forehead and his body. He has no fever. The poison has not touched him."

He turned to me and smiled, and the sight of its implacability chilled me.

"That is my problem, you see. The poison was in that cup. Until I find how I could be poisoned and Medius not, I cannot act. For not only had Medius reason to kill me, if thy report from Antipater be accurate, but Nearchus, the admiral of my fleet also, as thou shalt see. And 'twas Nearchus, remember, who admittedly poured my drink."

"And Susa the Persian?"

"He too, and for the best reason of all: that I have conquered his homeland."

Somewhere a gong sounded. Alexander pulled a cord, and presently the doors to the reception chamber opened. Two Persian slaves entered and prostrated themselves upon their knees, and a Macedonian servant in exquisite tunic bowed low and announced Nearchus and Susa the Persian.

The admiral of the fleet entered with regal stride and stood at attention before the dais as Alexander returned to his couch. The Persian stood behind Nearchus and a little to his right.

"We have come, Susa and I, at thy command," said Nearchus, his face showing the strain of the occasion; at the same time he gave me a sidelong glance that told me he cared not much for my presence. He was a stern-faced man with hollow cheeks and the pale blue eyes of an anchorite, and was perhaps the most powerful man among the Macedonians, for Alexander trusted and honored him highly.

"Yes, Nearchus, be seated," Alexander said, and Nearchus sat upon a stool below the king and watched with wary eyes as Alexander, showing now no signs of his illness, picked up several scrolls from a cushion beside him.

"These have been found among thy possessions, Nearchus," said Alexander. "Letters from my stepbrother Arideus in Lydia, arguing the futility of further conquest in Arabia. He urges thee to return to Macedonia, where Olympias, my mother, will heap honors undreamed of upon thee."

"I have told Alexander of these letters," Nearchus said quietly.

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"Yes, but thou didst not tell me thy decision. Should thou have decided to go, I would first have to be dead. Because alive I would not permit it!"

"Have our plans for the Arabian campaign ever suffered the slightest reservation of my enthusiasm, or diminution of my efforts on their behalf?"

Alexander's eyes fell before the cool inquiry of the other, and he shook his head. Then Nearchus turned to me and pointed an unwavering finger.

"There stands one whom thou should suspect, Alexander. Jolas is the troublemaker, the one who pours false assertions into thine ear."

"I think Alexander dost not doubt my love for him," said I.

"Nor do I," said Alexander. "My welfare has ever been uppermost in Jolas's mind."

"Unless Antipater has corrupted him," said Nearchus.

"Is it likely," I said, "when my life has been spent at Alexander's side, and I was in the company of Antipater only a few days?"

"Antipater is subtle at corrupting," Nearchus persisted. "Perhaps thou wouldst not know it."

"I would know it," said I.

"Enough!" Alexander cried, dismissing Nearchus, and the latter went out stiffly. The king then pointed his finger at Susa the Persian, who approached with a low obeisance.

"Last night Susa, thou toldest of great treasure buried beneath the ground by thy emperor Darius at Opia, a day's journey to the north. Thou sayest that thy love for me bade you tell me of it, so our campaign to Arabia might prosper with such wealth to sustain it."

"It is true, O King," the Persian said. He was an elderly man, clad in the garishly dyed Persian garments, wearing a high headgear which rose as far above his face as his white beard fell below it.

"Now thou wilt have a chance to prove thy fealty. Thou wilt assemble porters and carriages and soldiers, and go to Opia to fetch the treasure here to me. At once. I will give thee three days—one to go, one to load the treasure, and one to return. If thou art not here three days hence, I shall send swift messengers to kill thee. When I see the treasure, my doubt concerning thee shall be cleared."

"I understand, O King," said Susa, bowing low.

"And thou, Jolas, wilt accompany him to see that all goes well."

I stood stiffly with surprise at the sudden appointment, and Alexander smiled gently.

"Thou hast often complained of the boredom of litigating among the Macedonians, dear Jolas," he said. "Now I give thee opportunity for treasure hunting and adventure."

With a wave of his hand he dis-

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missed the Persian, who backed out of the chamber, and then Alexander descended from the dais and took my hand.

"I am relying upon thee, Jolas, to get the treasure safely to Babylon. Whilst thou art gone I shall continue probing the matter here. And take no longer than three days, dear friend, *for I shall be dead in six!*"

Of the outward journey to Opia I shall not dwell, except to mention that we left Babylon with fifty foot soldiers and ten carts, and twenty mounted horsemen, including Susa and myself, and all went well. Since Opia lies like most other Persian towns along the river, we did not digress into the desert, and never lost sight of trees and greenery.

There was the matter of digging for the treasure, which lay in a cemetery to the east of Opia; and among the bones of departed natives, Susa indeed did reveal great wealth, and thus establish his fealty to Alexander—amphorae of gold, masks of silver, heavy bronze chests filled with darics—gold coins with the figure of an archer impressed upon one side—as well as urns filled with tiny golden siglos, and much other wealth besides.

By sunset of the second day, the whole of the treasure, well worth an emperor's ransom, lay battened down securely within the carts, and I had to promulgate the warning that any soldier found with treasure upon his person would instantly be put to death.

Planning to return to Babylon early the following morning, we retired early—I to my tent, Susa to his. But in the middle of the night I was awakened by a sound outside, and rose to investigate. I had but stepped out into the moonlight when an arrow whirred by my cheek, penetrating the fabric of my tent, and turning, I saw the archer behind a tall dark cypress and set out after him. He fled at once among the graves and I followed as best I could; but so busy was I watching lest I tumble into the great holes we had dug and thus keep their ancient occupants company, I soon lost sight of him and stopped and stood in the quiet moonlight, smelling the odor of decay and trembling in the cool breeze that blew from the river.

On sudden thought I returned at once to the camp and looked in upon Susa in his tent, and found the Persian sleeping soundly there.

But that proved nothing. Susa could have hired an assassin to kill me. As well as could Nearchus—or Medius.

I returned thoughtfully to my tent, but did not sleep the remainder of the night.

On our return to Babylon I found that Alexander had quit the palace for a garden villa across the river, and thence Susa and I repaired upon the ferry.

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While crossing, Susa praised Alexander exceedingly for his policy of integrating the conquered peoples of Asia into the governmental fabric of the new empire, which stretched from the Aegean to the borders of India, and said how fortunate a man was he, Susa, a Persian, to have Alexander's trust in being appointed treasurer to the royal coffers. I replied that Susa's predecessor, Harpalus, a Macedonian, had proved himself faithless by stealing from the treasury, and Alexander had thought it fair and wise to entrust it thereafter to a native.

"But there are many, especially in Macedonia," I added, "who do not favor Alexander's policy of racial equality, and should like to reverse it."

Whereupon Susa fingered his beard and fell silent.

At the villa, which lay in lush gardens close to the edge of the river where it was cooler, we were shown into Alexander's presence by an elderly doctor, who when I questioned him as to our king's condition murmured, "It is truly a strange disease which works in him. I cannot mark the end of it."

And when I saw Alexander I knew why the doctor shook his head so doubtfully. The king sat upon his bed in a terrace overlooking the river, playing at dice with Medius, and his face looked white and strained, like a mask stretched into place by the fingers of Death himself. My heart smote me with pity as I knelt by Alexander and told him of the treasure we had brought from Opia.

"Good, Jolas," he said, laying aside the dice and smiling upon Susa. "Thou hast proved my trust, Susa. Nevertheless, thou wilt lodge here in this villa with me, as does Medius and Nearchus."

Thereupon Alexander dismissed the Persian and turned to Medius who sat opposite him and who was flushing redly and scowling at me the while.

"Why glowerest thou at Jolas, Medius?" Alexander asked. And when Medius did not answer, I spake up thus, "Perhaps Medius is surprised that I am here, dear Alexander. My life was set upon while at Opia, and if the archer had not aimed poorly, perhaps Medius would be smiling now."

With an oath Medius leaped to his feet, his hand upon his sword.

"Go, Medius!" Alexander cried, rising, and with an obeisance and a final black look at me, Medius left the terrace. Alexander sighed and walked unsteadily to the balcony, saying, "A furnace rages within me, Jolas, and consumes me steadily. In three days hence I will be dead."

"No, dear Alexander," said I, stung with anguish. "The Gods will not permit thy passing."

Alexander stooped to the edge of a small fish pond set into the floor of the terrace and picked up

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a cup of greenish glaze and held it before my eyes.

"This cup poisoned me," said he," and will help me to discover who my murderer is. I have not been idle these three days. Come, I will show thee what I have done."

In one room of the villa the king pointed out several near-naked men lying chained upon the floor. Two looked at us with fever-clouded eyes, and one was unconscious with great beads of sweat standing upon his forehead.

"I had several condemned criminals brought to me and gave them a choice: they could drink the poison I gave them, and let me watch the results, or be put at once to the sword, which was their just punishment. On the other hand, if they recovered from the poison, they would be free. Several volunteered gladly. Unfortunately, two have already died from the heavy dosage I gave them."

"But what dost thou seek to determine?" I asked as we returned to the terrace.

"How little of the poison is required in a third of a cup before it brings no fever. I think I quaffed the major lethal portion from the top, for the crystals are instantly soluble. Doubtless there was *some* mingling below, and if I can find a minimum dose that will leave the drinker unaffected . . ."

"Then it would explain how Medius could drink without being poisoned?"

"Yes," said Alexander, his lips turning cruel.

"But, dear Alexander, has not another thought occurred to thee? A man bitten by an asp, who lives, may be bitten again with less effect, and yet again. Could not Medius have accustomed himself to small doses of the poison by taking first a grain and then a larger quantity?"

Alexander breathed heavily in sudden anger, and for the first time spake sharply to me.

"Of course I did think of it," he said. "But I do not have time to determine whether this could be done!"

He rang a bell and when the attendants arrived he ordered that Nearchus should bring him the final prisoner.

"Thou shalt watch the end of my experiment, Jolas," said he, equable once again. "This poison is most powerful. Five crystals are lethal—but so are four; three bring fever and so do two, and both are probably lethal in the long run. Now if a *single* crystal brings fever by tomorrow, I shall know at least that Medius is in all probability innocent, for it means one is not immune from the smallest possible dosage."

Thereupon Alexander filled the green-glaze cup a third full of wine, and from the receptacle in his sword picked out a single crystal of the poison with a fine tweezers, his hand shaking in sudden

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weakness, and dropped the crystal into the liquid.

By then Nearchus had entered with a bearded, half-naked prisoner of tremendous proportions and the yellowish skin of a Paphlagonian. The man had a truculent expression and Nearchus watched him carefully as Alexander stepped forward, holding the cup out to him.

"Drink," he commanded. "I think perhaps freedom lies ahead for you, who are the last."

The dull eyes of the Paphlagonian looked first at Alexander and next at the cup. Then I beheld a spark rise in his orbs, and the following moment he raised his hand and dashed the cup out of the king's hand so that it crashed against the edge of the fish pond, the contents spilling into the water.

Almost at the sound of the shattering of the cup, Nearchus stepped forward, swung his sword aloft, and swept it down with tremendous force at the point where the prisoner's neck met his shoulder. The Paphlagonian fell with his head half severed and lay athwart the coping of the fish pool, covering the shards of the poison cup, while his heart, still beating, pumped blood into the clear water.

Meanwhile I saw Alexander back unsteadily towards his couch, his face flushing scarlet, beads of sweat forming upon his upper lip.

"I am aflame," he murmured, and I took him by the arm and helped him to his couch.

"Thou must cover thy feet for they are cold," I said as the sight of my weakened king made my own heart bleed, "and support thy back for the sharp pain that is in it." And I put a cushion gently behind him.

By the time Alexander lay resting easily, with his eyes closed, Nearchus had ordered the body of the Paphlagonian removed and I stood alone with the admiral in an antechamber.

"Thou art a troublemaker," Nearchus said, looking at me with loathing. "With thy talk of conspiracy, thou hast caused many deaths, and will bring ruin upon us all! Could it not be that Alexander has caught a mere disease and will recover? Must thou call us all assassins?"

"It is no disease," I said simply.

"Thou art a liar!" Nearchus cried, and left the chamber.

I returned at once to the terrace.

"Wilt thou have me at they side?" I asked softly. But Alexander watched me not, so absorbed was he gazing upon the shards of the green glaze and the blood mingled with the wine that still spread, staining the limpid waters of the pool, and now making invisible the fish within it.

For the remainder of the day, every time I sought admittance to Alexander's chambers, the doctor turned me away, saying the king was too ill to grant an audience.

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At the evening meal Alexander was absent, and Susa and Nearchus and Medius and I sat together without a word, and I could feel the united force of their dislike directed against me. I could not finish my supper, and rose to walk along the river bank until sun-down, returning to my quarters at the villa and retiring early, for I was greatly fatigued.

I was awakened in the middle of the night by the doctor, who told me to come at once, that Alexander had expressed a wish to see me.

At the sight of him I knew death was not far away. He put out a dry hand as I sat beside him, and I felt the heat of it burn my wrist.

"Dear Jolas," he said weakly. "Again I have cut the Gordian Knot. I know now who has poisoned me, and thou must help me to see justice done. Call Nearchus and Susa and Medius here at once. We shall make the final judgment!"

I went at once and awakened the others, and when they all stood before the king he spake again.

"Nearchus—Medius—thou hast known me long, hast stood beside me in battle, hast abided by my decisions and rarely found me wanting in wisdom. Susa, thou knowest me for a fair sovereign, and one who governs wisely. I tell thee now. *Thou must trust me.* I have discovered my assassin, but I wish to reveal my knowledge in my own way. Jolas—" he extended a hand in my direction. "Upon the table is a tray with three cups, filled with wine. Give one to each of them."

I handed a glazed cup, much like the one the Paphlagonian had recently shattered, to the two Macedonians and the Persian.

"Now believe me when I say this: *that the ones who are innocent of poisoning me need fear nothing.* But the one who is my murderer will himself be poisoned tonight! Now then, I command thee to drink, Susa!"

Susa blinked at Alexander and I thought his lip trembled, but he seized the cup with both hands and drank the contents in three great draughts. Then he put down the cup, rubbing his beard with the back of his hand.

"Drink thou, Nearchus," said Alexander.

Nearchus did not hesitate, but drained the cup as quickly as Susa had done.

"And now thou, Medius," said Alexander.

Medius raised the cup to his lips and then lowered it.

"But suppose thou art wrong, Alexander?" he asked quietly.

"I asked thee to trust me. I am not wrong."

Thereupon Medius raised the cup and drank, having trouble halfway through, as if his throat had closed against the liquid; but finally he managed to drain the cup and looked at Alexander defiantly.

Nearchus spake up then. "We have all three drunk, trusting thee,

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Alexander, but thou has raised Jolas of Philippi above us, as if he alone were free of thy suspicion. Why not have him drink as well?"

"But I have not fogotten him," Alexander said. "Jolas, there stands a cup of water upon the table for thee to drink. If thou, too, participate in this test, perhaps the anger of the others against thee will be diminished. I say unto thee as I said to the others; if you art innocent, thou hast nothing to fear. Drink the water."

I raised the glass to my lips and as I did Alexander spoke again. *"It is as pure as the water of my bath, Jolas."*

At that I hesitated and looked at Alexander with staring eyes and beating heart—and put the cup down upon the table.

"Thou art my murderer, Jolas," said Alexander, his eyes burning. 'Thou wert sitting beside the pool when I arrived there four nights ago. How didst thou poison it?"

"With some of the poison, which I tossed into it," said I, almost crying now that my perfidy was so inevitably disclosed. "But I did not mean to kill thee, Alexander," I pleaded. "Antipater assured me that he had tested the poison upon others and that taken through the pores the poison merely induces a fever that will pass away. But I saw thee *swallow* some of the water!"

"Antipater knew thee for a fool! He meant Alexander should die!" Nearchus cried, stepping towards me, but he stopped as Alexander raised his hand.

"And what reason did Antipater give thee?" he asked.

"He wished Medius dead and disgraced, so members of Medius's family in Macedonia, who have been troublesome to Antipater, could be removed from authority. He knew Medius was thy great drinking companion. I was to poison thee harmlessly, plant the knowledge of Medius's desire to assassinate thee, then when the effects of the poison became manifest, to indicate their origin, and accuse Medius of administering it in thy drink."

Alexander nodded with satisfaction.

"And what was to be thy reward, Jolas?"

"Antipater would beg thee to release me from duty here in Babylonia, and once in Macedonia he would give me the governorship of Sestos, a position thou, Alexander, wouldst never give me, since thou wouldst have me litigate in Babylonia until the end of my days."

"Not now, Jolas, not now!" Alexander said. Then rising unsteadily he pointed at Medius.

"Thou wert to be the victim, Medius," he said. *"Make Jolas drink the water!"*

With Medius's all-too-ready sword at my throat, I had no alternative and I drained the water to the last drop.

In the silence that followed I

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asked, "How didst thou know that it was I, Alexander?"

"The other day I asked thee if thou knewest this poison, and thou denied any knowledge of it. Yet when the Paphlagonian was killed I was stricken with a sudden seizure and thou helped me to my couch. 'Warmth for thy feet,' thou said, 'and a pillow for the great pain in thy back!' *But how couldst thou know my back hurt, feeling as if someone thrust a sword between my shoulder blades, if thou didst not already know the effects of the poison?* I had not told it to anyone. That began a train of thought, and when I saw the poisoned wine spreading within the pool and wondered how soon the fishes would die, I remembered the bathing water, and realized why Medius had not been poisoned by the third of the bitter cup, and why all my investigation had been fruitless. *There was no poison in the cup!* I had been poisoned *before* the drinking bout, not during it! . . ."

Alexander was too weak to go on, so Nearchus had me sent under guard to my house at the edge of the palace gardens and confined there. Medius wished to kill me at once, which was but natural, since it was he who had sent the archer after me, but Alexander and Nearchus were against it. It would be better for the ruling officers if it were thought Alexander died of disease, and so it will be told that I, too, died of the same, from my contact in the service of the king.

It is two days now since the great Alexander died. There is the sound of weeping and mourning in the streets of Babylon, and a hush in the palace gardens. The fever that burns me makes my pen cold to the touch, but I must finish this so the world will know that I did not mean that my dearest friend Alexander should die.

I have no use for men who would kill merely to satisfy their ambition.

"Q"

NEXT MONTH . . .

a gripping novelette about private eye Lew Archer —

ROSS MACDONALD's *Murder Is a Public Matter*

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EDITOR'S FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JOHN F. BYRNE**

TITLE: ***The Mystery of the Third Mustache***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Exendine

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Is it possible that Mr. Byrne is satirizing the whole "golden age" of the pure detective story? (With particular emphasis on E.Q.?) Even so and nevertheless, a brilliant story.*

DORONDA RICE WENT OUT TO THE terrace at nine o'clock on the morning of the murder. She was wearing a Tyrol straw, a shoulder bag, a shameless negligee, and she carried sections of the Sunday papers. She took a stiff chair at a table beneath a fringed umbrella and began on the crossword puzzle.

She was a small trim woman, carefully tended and preserved. Her hair had a glint of copper, her eyes were large and soulful, and from a distance she was not unlike the Doronda Rice of *Indiscreet in Eden* and lesser Broadway vehicles. She had loitered for many years at some age in the fifties, but her public personality would be forever female. She carried magnificent rings in her bag. When she thought what a hag she was, she put on rings and remembered how fabulous she was.

Presently she was aware of a shrug of shadow or a puff of sound.

"What's that? Who's there?"

It was Jessie who sometimes liked to say, *It's Jessie, your maiden servant.* Jessie was fat and gray and bugeyed, with a golden smile that was unfailing. She had a retirement income and did not need to work, but she said it made her sorrowful to dwell among the poor.

"Why do you creep up like that? What do you want?"

"Telephone," Jessie said.

"Where is everybody? Not a soul

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at breakfast. They know I can't endure to eat alone."

"You fetched it on yourself, Miss Dee. They say you took infuriated in the middle of the night, waking lawyers out of bed, ordering the police. You scorched the hides of one and all, I hear. What come over you? You never got too loud before. Mr. Leo, he say—"

"What? What did the lizard say?"

Leo Strawn was her stepson, offspring of her second husband, a textile manufacturer. He was an empty dreamer, a composer of petty music—*Free Fugue for Anthropomorphs*—melodies too rapt for common people. Doronda Rice had a name for him—Lizzardo, meaning chameleon, the humble lion, the belly-crawler.

"It skips my mind," said Jessie. "They all look meanly, grumbling around. Mr. Leo's swimming. Some are playing tennis. That highly handsome man and wife, Mrs. Pearl Kinvarra, each inquired for you. They anticipate to leave soon."

"He's a sweaty roustabout and she's a codfish cake. Who's on the telephone?"

"Oh, him—Colonel French. He prays to know what eventuates. He ain't sure what documents you want him to bring. He said you spoke so big last night he couldn't tell what you require."

"Tell him I have changed my mind. I don't require anything. Tell him to stay home."

"Oh, he didn't hold the wire. He called a time ago. He said he may detain himself till after luncheon time. You feeling bad, Miss Dee?"

"Horrible. My nerves are raw. I feel like ants are crawling over me. They know how all this distresses me, what I may have said, but they should know it was my pills and those agonizing headaches talking. But no one cares. They don't give a damn for me. All I mean to them is money."

"Now, now, you hush such talk."

"I did my best for Leo to make a man of him. And Rosemary—all her life I had such plans for her. And in return they defy me. They sneak and scheme to leave me. I'm all alone. There would not be one honest tear if I were dead tomorrow."

"Hush, hush. You are sweet admiration, our truly loving queen, and you will ever be. Here, you want a comfort tablet? Your pills and mine are quite the same."

"No, no—but I'll have some wine. Champagne, a large bottle, and never mind the hour of the day. Also send somebody here—Harlan, Rosemary, anyone for company."

She went back to her crossword puzzle. She was so expert a crossworder that she chose to work in handicap style, filling in only border words and then proceeding around new borders. She wrote in capital letters with a soft black pencil. Engrossed in definitions, she was not aware of the stalker who came a lit-

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tle later—not until a shiver over her skin announced the deadly presence. She turned with a startle of breath to see a weapon poised, and to glimpse the face of murder.

The blow knocked her forward. She lay on the flagstones in a strew of newspapers, and her thread of life became thin. But one far cell of her brain continued to perceive. A slit of vision saw the actress's face on a Sunday magazine, and the pencil moved in her fingers.

She was scrawling a mustache, signing the killer's name, as the second blow, the death stroke, was slashing . . .

The body was found when the champagne came, and the police were promptly notified. They were on the scene at ten o'clock. Exendine, the D.A.'s workhorse, was far across the county, however, golfing with campaign contributors, and the afternoon was aging when he arrived. The technicians had done their work by then. The body had been removed, many laboratory findings were already in, and Sergeant Dowson's folders were full of information.

"Your boss has a really big, big show on his hands," Dowson said. "It's a gasser for the tabloids."

"So the office warned. They gave me only the outline, though, so take it from the top. First, the ugly details."

"It was quick and tidy. The victim was sitting alone here, fifty yards from the house, secluded in plantings as you see. She was struck from behind with a flattish instrument—something like a pry bar. A second blow smashed across the ear and finished her. She was old and the job did not require mighty muscle."

"Any leading clues?"

"Nothing obvious. No prints of any significance. The weapon has not been found. And the victim's shoulder bag, with valuable rings in it, is missing."

"Who had the opportunity, Dowson?"

"That's an interesting aspect. The servants are in the clear. Cook and maid were at church in town and the chauffeur was parked outside the church. When you see the fourth one, you'll know she's innocent."

"Who isn't in the clear?"

"The intimate household is Leo Strawn, a stepson, and Rosemary Orr, a ward and protegee. There is an executive secretary, Harlan Lundquist. There are Mr. and Mrs. Carl Kinvarra, guests. They were swimming and playing tennis beyond that ridge of trees, and all will swear to every minute of any one of them."

"But they can't really account for each other, eh?"

"No. They were taking showers, sun baths, and each could have slipped away for the necessary minutes."

"And each had a motive, I suppose?"

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"Well, that's where the spectacular starts. What do you know of Doronda Rice?"

"Old-time actress, women's clubs, charity committees. I was in high school when she bought this estate. She ran some project, theater arts—Community Theater Foundation."

"Read this," said Dowson, giving him a folder, "and learn of older days. They're writing a book on her. They've got rooms full of scrapbooks, costumes, programs, letters, cheesecake photos. She didn't exactly rival the Barrymores, according to the news clips, but she was very womanly. She had playboy mayors and beer barons and champion fighters on her string. She once owned a famous speakeasy. She had several legal husbands."

Exendine whistled. "Go on, go on."

"Two of her husbands were millionaires, and one was beaten to death. This was in Wisconsin, under very strange circumstances, and to this day nobody knows who murdered him or why. His name was Strawn. Leo, his son, was ten years old at the time. He is now in his fat-faced forties. I asked his employment and he said he was a symbol-seeker. Last night he attacked Doronda with a bottle."

"Why?"

"It isn't clear. His father's estate was left in a trust controlled by his stepmother. When he wanted a dime he had to ask for it. George French can tell you how much Doronda's death was worth to Leo."

"The colonel was her attorney, eh? He's on the place?"

"He is indeed. He swooped in as I arrived and he has been obstructing justice ever since. I haven't got full details, but they must have had a screamer here last night. Doronda Rice subsisted on booster pills, breast of chicken, snifters of oxygen, and beakers of champagne, and she took a beak too many. The girl, her ward, ran out of the house in tears. The secretary was fired or resigned. The symbol-seeker threw bottles, and Doronda roused Colonel French. She wanted bank statements, stock holdings, accountants, the police. She had verbally disinherited everybody when they carried her to bed."

"She had her own money?"

"We found a will, unsigned, that reads like plenty. Community Theater got a chunk. Rosemary Orr got a bigger chunk. Her secretary was down for—hold on to your hat—fifty thousand."

"Let's see the secretary's folder."

"He's not the usual charm boy. He's young and smooth but he smokes a pipe. The cook thought he had his eye on Rosemary. The maid thought Doronda Rice was jealous."

"Rosemary Orr is a ward, you say?"

"Adopted as an infant. Additional information vague. Compare her eyes to Doronda's early pictures.

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Note that Doronda Rice, born Rouse, was a druggist's daughter from Orrville, Ohio."

"Don't confuse me," said Exendine. "How about the house guests —any motives?"

"The wife is a wealthy woman, older than her husband. She had no love for her hostess. The husband, Carl Kinvarra, is an older type from Barbell Beach, a handsome hunk of suntan. I'd say they're out of it except for his mustache."

"His mustache?"

"This is the tricky part," said Dowson. "Victim, sitting here, was working on a crossword puzzle. I give you photostat of it. Chalk outlines on the flagstones there show where she fell. She fell face down. She held a pencil. Beneath her hand was the roto section of a tabloid. The cover picture of a new Broadway actress. Lying there, in the seconds between blows, the victim wrote a message. Here's a blowup. Blobs and smears are blood."

"I'll be damned," said Exendine, studying the exhibit.

"The lab boys can prove that Doronda drew the mustache on the cover face as she was dying," Dowson said. "Carl Kinvarra wears a mustache. But so does the executive secretary."

Exendine sat in Doronda Rice's chair beneath the vast umbrella. He leafed through folders. He sat for a moment with eyes closed. He turned his head in various directions, noting pathways, hedges, bushy hidings. He studied the blowup of Doronda's puzzle.

Because of her handicap method, he could see where she had been working. A single border word was missing. A ten-letter word ending in Y, and the definition was *Flow*.

"She must have been a pro," he said. "These are tough puzzles, with sneaky definitions. Like *flow*, the verb, means gush or glide, but it may be *flow*, the noun, which is a current, a flux, an arm of the sea. The obvious word is rarely the right one."

"That's a funny mustache," Dowson said. "It's the kind kids draw—a walrus mustache."

"So what?"

"Or take that actress on the cover. She's in a murder play. She wears a man's disguise to kill her rival. Wouldn't it be curious if—"

"Oh, stop it, Dowson! I think we'll begin with the goings-on last night. Which is the flowing-est talker?"

"Madame Kinvarra."

"All right, I'll see her first."

"No, you won't," said Dowson, starting away, indicating approaching figures. "Ceremonies will open with a few remarks by George Ives French, the people's candidate."

Doronda Rice's lawyer was an upright man with a crew-cut stubble of icy hair. He had family background, a firm handclasp, a memory for names, a good platform delivery, and a consistent lack of suc-

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cess in local politics. He was walking an angry step ahead of an angry Chief of Police.

"This is a disgrace, sir, a public disgrace," he said to Exendine. "Such ignorance, brutality—I can't believe the District Attorney's staff is party to it, sir."

"I asked him twice," said the Chief. "I wanted to be nice. But he kept at it, yakyakyak."

"Don't tell me when I can talk! I know my rights."

"And I know my job. You'll talk when I say so. You'll telephone if I let you. You'll go home when I tell you to go."

"Just routine, Colonel," Exendine said quickly. "Unusual circumstances, such a famous name—the boss put a lid on the place. We don't want the press, a busybody circus, until important searches, more lab tests are completed. We hope that a clearer picture here will give us a fast, clean wrap-up."

"Gestapo goons!" said Colonel French. "I'm aware of your problems, sir, but I don't like nightstick law. I don't like to see good citizens, decent, innocent people, herded and bullied for hours by capering apes who should be chasing some red-handed moron."

"Who's a capering ape?"

"I dare you, sir, to lift one finger!"

"Wait, wait—" said Exendine. "Did you say moron, Colonel?"

"There's a busy highway just beyond. The grounds are open to intruders. The wealth of the owner was widely known. The purpose of the crime was primitive—robbery of her jewels. The method was crude—a thug's assault with a pick-up weapon. I say that some prowling moron is your obvious killer, sir."

"The bushy-haired intruder, eh? Well, sir—" Exendine laughed. "You've got me saying it! I'll be a happy man if some tourist thug turns out to be guilty. But until we jail your moron, Colonel, I am asking all involved to subordinate personal rights to the public interest."

"What do you mean, sir? How?"

"I mean that the statements made to the police, excepting those of the servants, are suspiciously unresponsive. They conceal relationships. They distort happenings. There is fear or guilt in all of them. Your own replies to Sergeant Dowson—"

"Damn it, man, I can't disclose confidential communications. I'll answer proper questions but I won't surmise on old wives' gossip."

"Is money a proper question? You handled the family finances, I think."

"The Colony Trust was administrator. They have the records—"

"Don't make us dig up records, Colonel. You know who stands to gain how much. I want every possible money motive for killing her. Here comes Dowson now. Please give him your information freely and completely."

Dowson wore the smile of a well-tipped waiter as he escorted a vivid lady. He presented a flimsy to Exen-

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dine, murmuring names. He arranged a terrace chair and put down a tall pale glass.

"The others are taking Scotch," he said, "but Mrs. Kinvarra takes vodka."

Exendine read the flimsy. Suspicious person in custody at Danbury. Could not explain early whereabouts. Could not explain woman's ring, large square-cut stone. Possible bloodstains on clothing. Result of test to follow . . .

Pearl Kinvarra had a Hottentot hair-do, a child's complexion, a sturdy figure strongly corseted. Her frock was rich and many colored. Her narrow look had been boiled in oil.

"If you want the truth, the whole truth, then start with the fact that Doronda Rice was a four-star bitch," she said. "I don't wish death for anyone—her horrid head, not that!—but I say the world can manage to survive without her. She had lived her life, her incomparable life, but she wasn't satisfied. She had to waft on, the rose of beauty, the perfume of love, her monkey clutch of senile decay hooking in the flesh of others and making zombies out of them. Am I going too fast for your shorthand?"

"No, no," Exendine said. "I'm not reporting this—just scribbling key words. Go right ahead."

"She was utterly selfish, inhumanly cruel. Poor Lee—Leo Strawn—my husband felt so sorry for him. The plots that evil woman used since Leo was a child to squeeze the manhood out of him are incredible. Look at Rosemary, big as a horse, dressing like a baby doll. And why, why? Because it was Doronda's style, because Doronda wanted dolls, because they had to please Doronda, flatter her, bow down to her in all existing things. That meachling secretary, God Almighty, mooning over her, wooing the ghost of her, smirking a fat bequest from her. It was debasing, sickening, and I told her so last night."

"Fine! I mean, last night is what I want."

"They were writing her story, you know. Rosemary and Lundquist had been researching, tape recording, typing away for weeks. Every evening, soaking up her wine, she'd read a new chapter and recall another thrilling escapade. I was up to here with her preposterous career, so I went to the den last night and took the television pipe. Next thing, midnight, an uproar."

"Leo Strawn threw a bottle, I believe. It struck a cabinet of porcelains."

"She had hundreds of little china dogs, such amusing poses, mementos of Mexico City, gifts of the Polish ambassador or Ivan Kreuger, the match king. She was sitting on the floor, loaded to the cesspool eyes, lashing out at everybody. I couldn't make sense of half she said, but my husband was restraining Leo, and Rosemary was blubbering. The secretary was soothing her."

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"Did she mention money?"

"Mention it? She was roaring money! She wanted her lawyer, all her accounts. Lundquist had forged her checks, she said, thousands of dollars, and she wanted the police. Nobody loved her, and every penny in her will was going to go to charity. Pretty soon she turned on me."

Mrs. Kinvarra took some vodka.

"It still makes me furious," she said. "That harridan, that foul old mummy, cackling at me, gloating over me. She asked my age. She asked my income. She asked how I enjoyed myself while Carlo was in Nova Scotia. She said she had blue notes to sell, seven for a penny, and the way she leered and sniggered I could have throttled her."

"What did she mean?"

"Nothing! My husband was fishing a year ago and I went to a health resort. There was absolutely nothing there but poor food and exercises."

Exendine led her on. As her vodka glass ran dry he produced the mustached blowup.

"We believe Doronda Rice saw her killer's face," he said. "This was found beneath her hand. What's your quick reaction?"

"Ridiculous!" she said, glaring at him.

"How?"

"She meant nothing to Kinvarra. He worked here once—some sort of construction work—and did so much for Leo's confidence. But she was so objectionable, with her casual remarks, that I refused to visit—until now."

"Is that your total reaction?"

"Certainly. What do you mean?"

"Just a coincidence," he said. "I noticed your hair-do, pulled up on your head, is the same new style as the cover girl's."

Dowson reappeared as she went away. He had estimates from Colonel French, late reports from search teams combing the vicinity, but no news from Danbury. Exendine propped his elbows on the table and massaged his eyebrows with the heels of his hands. Sometimes he had hunches—drawing to a three-card flush or Legal Beagle in the second race—but now there was only darkness in his mind.

"Did you get anywhere?" said Dowson.

"Maybe. But who knows if it's farther on or deeper in."

"Who's next?"

"I don't know. The key question, Dowson, is why she had to die, whambam, so early in the morning. Let's go to the house. The sudden need to bash her in was born up there last night, and the four I haven't questioned were present at the birth. I'll take 'em all at once."

"That's my boy who said that," Dowson grinned. "That's why you'll wind up either in the governor's chair or a wino in the gutter."

"Gather them in some intimate room where the whites of their eyes can be seen. Oh, yes—and find me

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a dictionary. There should be a puzzle-solver's unabridged somewhere around."

"I thought of that," said Dowson. "The mustache could be obvious—*cherchez la moustache*. Or it could have a puzzle meaning. Or it could have a private meaning—a family secret. Do you think the killer saw what she drew? If so, and it wasn't destroyed, it clearly indicates—"

"Quit it!" said Exendine. "Stop talking like a teevee pilot film."

"Tell you what I'll do," said Dowson. "I'll write a name. I'll seal it in an envelope. Ask me for it when we've nabbed the killer."

Dowson chose an air-cooled room with tall windows and languid chairs. He provided a table for Exendine with reference folders, a radio summary, a water jug, and a worn Webster's International. Exendine read the radio briefs. He opened the dictionary to the Ms.

murder, n. [ME. *morder* from AS. *morth* murder; akin to OSlav. *mreti* to die, L. *mortis* death, Gr. *brotos, mortos,* mortal. Cf. AMBROSIA, MURRAIN.] 1. *Early Eng. Law.* The killing of a person secretly or with concealment, as opposed to an open killing.

Dowson led the suspects in and made crisp introductions. He casually touched an ear to indicate that a listening device was in operation.

"I will be close outside, sir," he said elaborately, "if anything is needed."

Exendine displayed the blowups of the mustached girl, the crossword puzzle, and explained them in a brief description of the attack.

"Please pass them around," he said.

They went from Carl Kinvarra, a god of pirates, to Leo Strawn, a frustrate monk, to Rosemary Orr, a fawn in hiding, to Harlan Lundquist, sharp as a whip. Exendine considered them one by one, letting moments of silence sink in.

"You four are in alarms and danger," he said. "We are on the hunt for a strong-arm stranger who killed and robbed Doronda Rice, but my hunch is he will not be found. She was killed deliberately, killed for an urgent reason, by a dead-sure second blow as she was dying. Robbery was incidental. She was killed by someone who knew her well. She was killed for reasons in her house—by someone here in her house."

"Hear, hear," said Leo Strawn, patting unsightly hands together. "Well put, old boy. Which of us do you prefer?"

"If you're guiltless," said Exendine, "your quickest escape from involvement is to help us nail the killer. We can be straight and tidy about it, or cute and painful. Those who prefer to be questioned by others at another place can leave now."

"He's right, Lee," said Harlan Lundquist. "We have had enough of that cool, cool tune."

The secretary had tawny hair, a

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bony face. His eyeglasses, his clipped speech, gave a first impression of a British diplomat, but Dowson's dossier said he was a native of Platte, Nebraska, born in 1930, and a graduate of Creighton University in Omaha.

"Good for you, Mr. Lundquist," said Exendine. "Let's toot it loud and clear. You came to work for Doronda Rice sixteen months ago. She liked your work. Your salary rose from sixty dollars to eighty to a hundred and twenty a week. Your personal charm won costly gifts—and your name in her will. But she caught you stealing. She threatened to tell the police and to make another will. Before she could execute those threats she was murdered. Was it your mustache she signed as she died?"

"I could have killed her," the secretary said. "I went to the terrace early, shortly after nine. I waited near the rose arbor, almost in sight of her, thinking of what to say. But I realized there was nothing to say. What use was another scene? My one resort was to go, to clear out, and I went back to the pool to say so."

"To say so to whom?"

"To me," said Rosemary Orr. "I was supposed to go with him."

She was a tall girl, strongly made. Her beauty was in her great dark eyes, widely set. She kept them downcast, watching her clasped hands in her lap.

"But you wouldn't go, Rosemary," said Lundquist. "Your only chance to be a person, to find a world, was to run away from her, to hide from her. You knew it. Leo knew it. But you couldn't break free. There was always some reason to stay another day, another week. You didn't really want to go. You never cared enough to go."

"It isn't true, it isn't true! I only wanted to be sure."

"You only wanted to be safe," he said. "You wanted to be warm and fed, secure in old discomforts. I don't blame you. I had nothing sure to offer. But now you'll never get away. Her money has its claws in you just as Doronda had. You've got houses and trust accounts, cars and servants and garden clubs, charities to administer, and you'll do what Doronda willed you to do."

"Damn her money! You know it wasn't money, Harlan. You know me better than that."

"Do I? Which one of you do I know—last week's woman or yesterday's lost child?"

"I was afraid," she said, "I admit it. You don't know what she could do, the insanities, unless she had her way. She had the checks, your signatures. She would swear to anything."

"I think we can forget the checks," said Carl Kinvarra. "I explained them to Colonel French, and he advised—"

"Keep out of this," said Lundquist. "I don't need your help."

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"Where are these checks?" said Exendine. "Who received them originally? How much is involved?"

"I received them," the secretary said. "They were issued in small amounts—a total of a few hundred dollars—but were altered and cashed for several thousand dollars. They were in Miss Rice's bag last time I saw them."

"Did you cash them?"

"I endorsed them. I was negligent and I'm responsible."

"He's a liar," said Leo Strawn. "He's completely innocent, as D. R. knew damned well. She had the canceled vouchers for days, nursing them at her bosom, working up her tragic mood. They let her stage a favorite role—the outcast mother, betrayed by those she trusted most. Today would have found her sweetly forgiving, explaining all, ordering penitent knickknacks from Tiffany's."

"He's drinking," Carl Kinvarra said. "Don't make needless trouble, Lee. Let the big brain-boy handle it."

"He didn't kill her," said the stepson. "Harlan didn't hate her hard enough to kill her."

"Who did?" said Exendine.

"I did. I used to dream of it, pounding and stomping. I should have done it years ago. You want to know about the checks? *I* kited them. I cashed them. I did it crudely, openly—and do you know why?"

"Why?"

"To be a naughty boy. To prove I could be as stupidly arrogant as she was. A recording company—for egghead albums—made a share-the-risks proposal to me. She said they were crooks. They were crooks. I threw her thousands away, yes, and I would do it again!"

"Miss Rice knew you were guilty?"

"Certainly she knew. I'd remove small checks when I took household deposits to town. The bank never questioned my alterations. They knew it was all in the family if anything was wrong."

"You're heir to a rich estate," said Exendine. "Did it pay you an allowance?"

"I heard George French say, years ago, that the monthly income of the trust was ten thousand dollars. I got one hundred of it."

"Were you close to your father?"

"I was ten years old. I don't remember."

"Who murdered him?"

"Read D.R.'s manuscript. Ask Harlan, ask Rosemary—they did the research. The police blamed trade racketeers. He was clubbed to death at our summer camp. His body was found in the lake. D.R. hinted many secrets about it. She had tales of orgies, crazy guides, nameless suicide attempts. She was telling more last night when I began the brawl."

"You threw a bottle. It shattered some of her keepsakes."

"That's right. She told those lies

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to needle me, to make my father contemptible, to make him out the cuckold. He had one gold tooth. I remembered him smiling down on her, waiting on her. I remembered how she'd mimic me, the fat boy, and make a public show. I didn't want to break the china dogs. I threw at her, straight at her face. I meant to kill her."

"Did you kill her?"

"I wish I had. I hope she thought I did. She caught me in her memory room one day when I was twelve. She kept press books and photographs, and closets full of costumes. I was cutting holes in a gown. I had scrawled with crayon, mustaches and obscenities, on dozens of her photos. She came at me with the scissors and Jessie had to wrestle her off. Jessie remembers. Ask Jessie whose name the mustache meant."

"Oh, stop him, stop him!" cried Rosemary Orr. "Leo didn't kill her. He damned her, detested her, but he knew how to endure her. She was old and failing. He wouldn't risk his freedom, when it was so close, for a foolish splurge of violence."

"I see what you mean," said Exendine. "We want a mustache with more bristle."

"I *don't* mean that. I think her scrawl was nothing. It might even point to me. I was a lumpish child. I was sent off to schools. I had expensive instruction in voice and eurythmics. I had orthodontic surgery and electrolytic surgery. I don't remember my hairy face, protruding teeth, but D.R. didn't forget. She had pet names to remind me how coarse and clumsy I was born, how unworthy of her. Her favorite name was Little Walrus."

"Did you have a pet name for her? How were you related to her?"

"I don't know. She'd say I was nothing, an orphanage stray, but then she'd mention a best friend's child, or a sister's child. Even Jessie doesn't know."

"But you did know—it was commonly known—that you were the principal beneficiary in her will?"

"In which will?" said Leo Strawn. "D.R. had a large assortment. She would add a new bequest—twenty thousand to my trusty chauffeur—and leave the will where even delivery boys could read it. But she never signed these wills. Her true intentions are in her deposit vault."

Exendine took a drink of water. He turned pages of the dictionary, and another hunch began to whisper as he read.

mustache, n. [F. *moustache,* It. *mostaccio,* fr. Gr. *mystax,* fr. or akin to *mastax,* mouth. See MOUTH.] 1. The hair growing on man's (or, rarely, woman's) upper lip. 2. Short for MUSTACHE MONKEY.

"All right," he said briskly. "This leaves only Mr. Kinvarra, the casual bystander, completely unconcerned with Miss Rice's affairs."

"Right!" said Carl Kinvarra.

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"Hadn't seen D.R. in years. Just stopped by for a day or two."

He was clean and shiny. The gleam of health was on his pelt, his raven hair, his smile. His mustache was lean and adventurous. His voice was most sincere.

"How long have you worn a mustache?" said Exendine.

"Since the Air Force—'43."

"How long have you been acquainted here?"

"How long, Lee? Nine years, ten? My crew installed the swimming pool. Learned to feel at home.

"How long have you been married?"

"Seven years," said Kinvarra after a pause. "What's the difference? What are you digging for?"

"You are a fisherman?"

"I fish, I hunt, I do a lot of things."

"Are you musical, Mr. Kinvarra? Do you play blue notes, or write them?"

"I don't understand."

"Let's lay it on the line," said Exendine. "An eye-catching man is married to a jealous older woman. He has got it very good—gay resorts, the careless golden years—but he wants egg in his beer. He goes on he-man fishing jaunts that wend to some divorceful nest. Doronda Rice has proof. She taunts him with betraying letters, seven for a penny, that can disrupt his marriage. She must be promptly and permanently silenced, and that is why you bashed her head this morning."

"I didn't!" Kinvarra said shrilly, lunging from his chair. "I swear to God I never touched her."

"She forced you to come," said Exendine. "She put the screws on you. You murdered her for letters she carried in her shoulder bag."

Rosemary Orr got up. Her face was pinched, her eyes slitted, as she walked with one hand reaching out. Exendine moved to bar her way.

"I'm going," she said. "I'll tell the truth but I don't want it blabbered in front of everybody."

"Let her go," the secretary said to Exendine, pushing him aside.

"I admit the letters," Kinvarra said loudly, "but I can prove I didn't kill her. I worked it out, a timetable."

"He can't compel you to stay, Rosemary," the secretary said. He gave her his handkerchief. "Don't be afraid. Don't cry."

"I'm not crying for myself," she said. "It's you. I couldn't bear to watch your face. *I'm* the one she was taunting, Harlan—quoting from Carlo's letters to me. She knew I was in love with you. She had the letters, a stolen diary, to spoil the tenderness we had found, to show you how coarse and common I am, what a slut I am."

Lundquist took her hands. He looked at her solemnly, then looked toward Carl Kinvarra.

"The pretty parlor tomcat," he said. "The trusted family friend."

"It wasn't Carlo's fault," Rose-

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mary said. "I had an old, old crush on him. I sent him silly presents after he was married. When you first came to work, Harlan, you were taken in by D.R.'s charm, so I saw him in New York. He was simply friendly but I kept after him. I chased and teased. I found the place where we could be while fishing guides sent messages from Nova Scotia."

The telephone on Exendine's table rang.

"Those letters are my property," said Kinvarra. "They mean nothing. It was one of those things, an emotional spree. We were strangers in the dark getting rid of dark compulsions. But women don't understand. Those letters would destroy our happiness."

"You hunk of blubber!" said Harlan Lundquist, taking off his glasses.

The D.A.'s secretary was on the telephone. Exendine was listening, glancing down at the dictionary page, pondering on the word *mustache,* reading definition Number 3, reading the killer it suggested, when Leo Shawn began to yell.

"Hang on, Kate," said Exendine, "there's a fight going on."

Harlan Lundquist was bravely charging, freely swinging, but the god of pirates had the reach to fend him off. Leo Shawn, hit by an elbow, had sustained the major damage as Dowson and the Chief of Police came in. The Chief bellied Lundquist away. Mrs. Kinvarra and Colonel French were in the doorway, and the woman cried out as Dowson took a needless grip on her husband's arm.

"Don't say a word, Carl," she ordered, "until we get our own attorney!"

"Quiet, please," said Dowson. "Everybody quiet."

"Keep this line open," Exendine said into the telephone. "Surprising discovery, new light on the case, might break it quickly now. Flash the boss and keep hanging on, Kate."

He put down the telephone. The room was still.

"The murder motive born in this house last night," he said slowly. "She was coldly murdered by someone who knew her, who robbed as an afterthought. She was murdered to eliminate her immediate threat to someone here."

He looked toward Mrs. Kinvarra and Colonel French in the doorway.

"All this was completely true," he said, "but I now see, Colonel, that you were also right. She was murdered by mistake. Her household is guiltless. The bushy-haired intruder really did do it."

Everyone watched him. Nobody spoke.

"Doronda Rice worked puzzles," he said. "She concocted pet names. To her a mustache meant whiskers, a monkey, or this third definition that I now read to you from her dictionary: 'Three, a soldier;—in phrase *old mustache.* A Gallicism.'"

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"Old soldier—?" said the Chief of Police.

"Gallicism?" Dowson said. "But we drove in together!"

"I'd better call back," said Exendine to the telephone. "Tell the boss we are certain, though, that Doronda Rice's financial aide, Colonel G. I. French, was her murderer."

The first official news release stated that Colonel French had been juggling trustee funds. Doronda Rice's midnight summons, angry and garbled, demanding an accounting, had the sound to him of exposure and ruin. He knew the layout of her estate and knew her Sunday habits. He telephoned early, questioning a servant, establishing whereabouts, saying he would be delayed. Instead he came at once to kill. Hours later he returned, all innocent.

"Guilty conscience," said Dowson, reading a copy. "The imaginary motive of the unsuspected. You might say she was murdered for nothing."

"You might," said Exendine, waiting for the D.A.'s triumphal chariot.

Miss Rice's lawyer had not confessed, the news release admitted, but his early call had been traced to a nearby filling station. His blue sedan had been parked in a lane beyond the estate that morning. The lane had yielded tire tracks and heelprints, and similar tire tracks near a pond some miles away had inspired dragging operations for the murder weapon and her shoulder bag.

"All right, I'm wrong," said Dowson. "But it wasn't fair. Who would think of old mustache, a French mustache, when Frenchmen wax 'em up. She drew a sort of walrus mustache, turned down."

He took an envelope from an inside pocket and ripped it open.

"Her Little Walrus, Rosemary Orr," he said. "I looked it up. I copied it out of the dictionary. Read it."

> walrus [D. *walrus, walros,* of Scand. origin; cf. Dan. & Nor. *hvalros,* and ON. *hrosshvalr* a kind of whale, lit., horse whale, confused with *rosmhvalr* walrus. See ROSMARINE.]

"What's a rosmarine?" said Exendine.

"It's a sea animal fabled to climb by its teeth to the top of rocks to feed on the dew. There's also a one-word second meaning—Rosemary."

He tore up the envelope, shrugging. As Exendine watched, he took other envelopes from other pockets.

"Ain't I a dirty dog?" he said. "I wrote five names—every possible name except the right one."

"The puzzle word for such tricks," said Exendine, "is cozenage."

"You made a lucky stab," said Dowson, "but actually you leave the subtle puzzles, the vital mysteries here, still unsolved."

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"Like what?"

"Like the bloodstained Danbury busboy with a priceless emerald that didn't belong to Doronda. Whose is it?"

"Better check his name in Webster's—it's Rubenzahl."

"What will Pearl Kinvarra do when she thinks a little deeper into Nova Scotia? Can the world of music survive the shock of a head-on hit by Leo, the fireball, with ten grand a month in his pocket? How about the girl and the secretary? Did Doronda will her enough money for happiness—or for ruination?"

"I like that girl," said Exendine. "I wonder what will happen to her."

Next month we are going to bring you a sensational pre-publication offer on EQMM's newest publication—a 320-page book containing three outstanding short novels and approximately 20 of the finest short stories to appear during our 18-year history. This fabulous bargain is bursting at the seams with the work of a "Who's Who" of famous modern authors—noted literary figures as well as the mystery greats. Better reserve space on your bookshelves now for this mystery masterpiece.

Contest Winner . . .

In our April issue, we offered a prize for the best answer to the question asked in the title of the Richard Matheson story, "What Was in the Box?" The number of entries in the contest was high, and their quality excellent—the judges had a most difficult decision to make. We are pleased to report, however, that the winner was: Dorothy W. Palmer, of Spring Lake, New Jersey.

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Beginning another series of crime, detective, and mystery stories by Jack London . . . A tale, to quote the author, of "raw and howling savagery," of "brutal, bestial savagery," against the cruel background of old Alaska when it was a dark place beyond the last boundaries of the world . . .

FAIR WARNING: this story is not for the squeamish.

LOST FACE

by JACK LONDON

IT WAS THE END. SUBIENKOW HAD traveled a long trail of bitterness and horror, homing like a dove for the capitals of Europe; and here, farther away than ever, in Russian America, the trail ceased.

He sat in the snow, arms tied behind him, waiting for the torture. He stared curiously before him at a huge Cossack prone in the snow, moaning in his pain. The men had finished handling the giant and had turned him over to the women. That the women exceeded the fiendishness of the men, the Cossack's cries attested.

Subienkow looked on and shuddered. He was not afraid to die. He had carried his life too long in his hands, on that weary trail from Warsaw to Nulato, to shudder at mere dying. But he objected to the torture. It offended his soul. And this offense, in turn, was not because of the mere pain he must endure, but of the sorry spectacle the pain would make of him. He knew that he would pray and beg and entreat, even as Big Ivan and the others that had gone before. This would not be nice. To pass out bravely and cleanly, with a smile and a jest—ah, that would have been the way. But to lose control, to have his soul upset by the pangs of the flesh, to screech and gibber like an ape—ah, that was what was so terrible.

There had been no chance to escape. From the beginning, Fate had been driving him to this end. Without doubt, in the foundations of the world was graved this end for him—for him, who was so fine and sensitive, who was a dreamer, a poet, an artist. Before he was even dreamed of, it had been determined that the quivering bundle of sensitiveness that constituted him should be doomed to live in raw and howling savagery, and to die in this far land of night, in this dark place beyond the last boundaries of the world.

He sighed. So that thing before him was Big Ivan—Big Ivan the

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giant, the man without nerves, the man of iron, the Cossack turned freebooter of the seas, who was phlegmatic as an ox, with a nervous system so low that what was great pain to ordinary men was scarcely a tickle to him. Well, trust these Nulato Indians to find Big Ivan's nerves and trace them to the roots of his quivering soul. It was inconceivable a man could suffer so much and yet live. Big Ivan was paying for his low order of nerves. Already he had lasted twice as long as any of the others.

Subienkow felt that he could not stand the Cossack's sufferings much longer. Why didn't Ivan die? Subienkow would go mad if that screaming did not cease. But when it did cease, his turn would come. And there was Yakaga awaiting him, grinning at him even now in anticipation—Yakaga, whom only last week he had kicked out of the fort, and on whose face he had laid the lash of his dog whip. Yakaga would attend to him. Doubtlessly Yakaga was saving for him more refined tortures, more exquisite nerve-racking . . . Ah, that must have been a good one, from the way Ivan screamed. The squaws bending over him stepped back with laughter and clapping of hands. Subienkow saw the monstrous thing that had been perpetrated and began to laugh hysterically. The Indians looked at him in wonderment that he should laugh. But Subienkow could not stop.

This would never do. He controlled himself, the spasmodic twitchings slowly dying away. He strove to think of other things, and began reading back in his own life. He remembered his mother and his father, and the little spotted pony, and the French tutor who had taught him dancing and sneaked him an old worn copy of Voltaire. Once more he saw Paris, and dreary London, and gay Vienna, and Rome. And once more he saw that wild group of youths who had dreamed, even as he, the dream of an independent Poland with a king of Poland on the throne at Warsaw.

Ah, there it was that the long trail began. Well, he had lasted longest. One by one, beginning with the two executed at St. Petersburg, he took up the count of the passing of those brave spirits. Here one had been beaten to death by a jailer, and there, on that blood-stained highway of the exiles where they had marched for endless months, another had dropped by the way. Always it had been savagery—brutal, bestial savagery. They had died—of fever, in the mines, under the knout. The last two had died after the escape, and he alone had won to Kamtchatka with the stolen papers and the money of a traveler he had left lying in the snow.

It had been nothing but savagery. Everybody had killed. He had killed that traveler for his pass-

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ports. He had proved that he was a man of parts by dueling with two Russian officers on a single day. He had had to prove himself in order to win to a place among the fur thieves. Behind him lay the thousand-years-long road across all Siberia and Russia. He could not escape that way. The only way was ahead, across the dark and icy sea of Bering to Alaska.

His comrades had been Slavonian hunters and Russian adventurers, Mongols and Tartars and Siberian aborigines; and through the savages of the new world they had cut a path of blood. They had massacred whole villages that refused to pay the fur tribute; and they, in turn, had been massacred by ships' companies. He, with one Finn, had been the sole survivors of such a company. They had spent a winter of solitude and starvation on a lonely Aleutian isle, and their rescue in the spring by another fur ship had been one chance in a thousand.

But always the terrible savagery had hemmed him in. Passing from ship to ship, and always refusing to return, he had come to the ship that explored south. All down the Alaska coast they had encountered nothing but hosts of savages. Every anchorage among the beetling islands or under the frowning cliffs of the mainland had meant a battle or a storm. Either the gales blew, threatening destruction, or the war canoes came, manned by howling natives with the war paint on their faces, who came to learn the bloody virtues of the sea rovers' gunpowder.

South, south they had coasted, clear to the myth-land of California. Here, it was said, were Spanish adventurers who had fought their way up from Mexico. He had had hopes of those Spanish adventurers. Escaping to them, the rest would have been easy—a year or two, what did it matter more or less—and he would win to Mexico, then a ship, and Europe would be his again.

But they had met no Spaniards. They had encountered only the same impregnable wall of savagery.

The years had passed. He had served under Tebenkoff when Michaelovski Redoubt was built. He had spent two years in the Kuskokwim country. Two summers, in the month of June, he had managed to be at the head of Kotzebue Sound. Here, at this time, the tribes assembled for barter; here were to be found spotted deerskins from Siberia, ivory from the Diomedes, walrus skins from the shores of the Arctic, strange stone lamps, passing in trade from tribe to tribe, and, once, a hunting knife of English make.

Subienkow bullied and cajoled and bribed. Every far-journeyer or strange tribesman was brought before him. Perils unaccountable and unthinkable were mentioned, as well as wild beasts, hostile tribes, impenetrable forests, and mighty

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mountain ranges; but always from beyond came the rumor of white-skinned men, blue of eye and fair of hair, who fought like devils and who sought always for furs. They were to the east—far, far to the east. No one had seen them. It was the word that had been passed along.

But at last came the whisper that gave Subienkow courage. In the east lay a great river where these blue-eyed men dwelt. The river was called the Yukon. South of Michaelovski Redoubt emptied another great river which the Russians knew as the Kwikpak. These two rivers were one, ran the whisper.

Subienkow returned to Michaelovski. For a year he urged an expedition up the Kwikpak. Then arose Malakoff, the Russian half-breed, to lead the wildest and most ferocious of the hell's broth of mongrel adventurers who had crossed from Kamtchatka. Subienkow was his lieutenant.

They threaded the mazes of the great delta of the Kwikpak, picked up the first low hills on the northern bank, and for half a thousand miles, in skin canoes loaded to the gunwales with trade goods and ammunition, fought their way against the five-knot current of a river that ran from two to ten miles wide in a channel many fathoms deep.

Malakoff decided to build the fort at Nulato. Subienkow urged to go farther. But he quickly reconciled himself to Nulato. The long winter was coming on. It would be better to wait. Early the following summer, when the ice was gone, he would disappear up the Kwikpak and work his way to the Hudson Bay Company's posts.

Came the building of the fort. It was enforced labor. The tiered walls of logs arose to the sighs and groans of the Nulato Indians. The lash was laid on their backs, and it was the iron hand of the freebooters of the sea that laid on the lash. There were Indians who ran away, and when they were caught they were brought back and spread-eagled before the fort, where they and their tribe learned the efficacy of the knout. Two died under it; others were injured for life; and the rest ran away no more.

The snow was flying before the fort was finished, and then it was the time for furs. A heavy tribute was laid on the tribe. Blows and lashings continued, and so that the tribute should be paid, the women and children were held as hostages and treated with the barbarity that only the fur thieves knew.

Well, it had been a sowing of blood, and now came the harvest. The fort was gone. In the light of its burning, half the fur thieves had been cut down. The other half had passed under the torture. Only Subienkow remained, or Subienkow and Big Ivan, if that whimpering, moaning thing in the snow could be called Big Ivan.

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Subienkow caught Yakaga grinning at him. There was no gainsaying Yakaga. The mark of the lash was still on his face. After all, Subienkow could not blame him, but he disliked the thought of what Yakaga would do to him. He thought of appealing to Makamuk, the head-chief; but his judgment told him that such appeal was useless. Then, too, he thought of bursting his bonds and dying fighting. Such an end would be quick. But he could not break his bonds. Caribou thongs were stronger than he. Still devising, another thought came to him. He signed for Makamuk and an interpreter who knew the coast dialect.

"Oh, Makamuk," he said, "I am not minded to die, I am a great man, and it is foolishness for me to die. In truth, I shall not die. I am not like these carrion."

He looked at the moaning thing that had once been Big Ivan, and stirred it contemptuously with his toe.

"I am too wise to die. Behold, I have a great medicine. I alone know this medicine. Since I am not going to die, I shall exchange this medicine with you."

"What is this medicine?" Makamuk demanded.

Subienkow debated with himself for a moment, as if loath to part with the secret.

"I will tell you. A little bit of this medicine rubbed on the skin makes the skin hard like a rock, hard like iron, so that no cutting weapon can cut it. The strongest blow of a cutting weapon is a vain thing against it. A bone knife becomes like a piece of mud; and it will turn the edge of the iron knives we have brought among you. What will you give me for the secret of the medicine?"

"I will give you your life," Makamuk made answer through the interpreter.

Subienkow laughed scornfully.

"And you shall be a slave in my house until you die."

The Pole laughed more scornfully.

"Untie my hands and feet and let us talk," he said.

The chief made the sign; and when he was loosed Subienkow rolled a cigarette and lighted it.

"This is foolish talk," said Makamuk. "There is no such medicine. It cannot be. A cutting edge is stronger than any medicine."

The chief was incredulous, and yet he wavered. He had seen too many deviltries of fur thieves that worked. He could not wholly doubt.

"I will give you your life; but you shall not be a slave," he announced.

"More than that."

Subienkow played his game as coolly as if he were bartering for a foxskin.

"It is a very great medicine. It has saved my life many times. I want a sled and dogs, and six of your hunters to travel with me down the

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river and give me safety to one day's sleep from Michaelovski Redoubt."

"You must live here, and teach us all your deviltries," was the reply.

Subienkow shrugged and remained silent. He blew cigarette smoke out on the icy air and curiously regarded what remained of the big Cossack.

"That scar!" Makamuk said suddenly, pointing to the Pole's neck, where a livid mark advertised the slash of a knife in a Kamtchatkan brawl. "The medicine is not good. The cutting edge was stronger than the medicine."

"It was a strong man that drove the stroke. Stronger than you, stronger than your strongest hunter, stronger than he."

Again, with the toe of his moccasin, Subienkow touched the Cossack—a grisly spectacle, no longer conscious—yet in whose dismembered body the pain-racked life still clung.

"Also, the medicine was weak. For at that place there were no berries of a certain kind, of which I see you have plenty in this country. The medicine here will be strong."

"I will let you go down river," said Makamuk, "and the sled and the dogs and the six hunters to give you safety shall be yours."

"You are slow," was the cool rejoinder. "You have committed an offense against my medicine in that you did not at once accept my terms. Behold, I now demand more. I want one hundred beaver skins." Makamuk sneered. "I want one hundred pounds of dried fish." Makamuk nodded, for fish were plentiful and cheap. "I want two sleds—one for me and one for my furs and fish. And my rifle must be returned to me. If you do not like the price, in a little while the price will grow."

Yakaga whispered to the chief.

"But how can I know your medicine is true medicine?" Makamuk asked.

"It is very easy. First, I shall go into the woods—"

Again Yakaga whispered to Makamuk, who made a suspicious dissent.

"You can send twenty hunters with me," Subienkow went on. "You see, I must get the berries and the roots with which to make the medicine. Then, when you have brought the two sleds and loaded on them the fish and the beaver skins and the rifle, and when you have told off the six hunters who will go with me—then, when all is ready, I will rub the medicine on my neck, so, and lay my neck there on that log. Then can your strongest hunter take the ax and strike three times on my neck. You yourself can strike the three times."

Makamuk stood with gaping mouth, drinking in this latest and most wonderful magic of the fur thieves.

"But first," the Pole added hast-

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ily, "between each blow I must put on fresh medicine. The ax is heavy and sharp, and I want no mistakes."

"All that you have asked shall be yours," Makamuk cried in a rush of acceptance. "Proceed to make your medicine."

Subienkow concealed his elation. He was playing a desperate game, and there must be no slips. He spoke arrogantly.

"You have been slow. My medicine is offended. To make the offense clean you must give me your daughter."

He pointed to the girl, an unwholesome creature, with a cast in one eye and a bristling wolf-tooth. Makamuk was angry, but the Pole remained imperturbable.

"Make haste," Subienkow threatened. "If you are not quick, I shall demand yet more."

In the silence that followed, the dreary northland scene faded from before him, and he saw once more his native land, and France; and once, as he glanced at the wolf-toothed girl, he remembered another girl, a singer and dancer, whom he had known when as a youth he first came to Paris.

"What do you want with the girl?" Makamuk asked.

"To go down the river with me." Subienkow glanced her over critically. "She will make a good wife, and it is an honor worthy of my medicine to be married to your blood."

Again he remembered the singer and dancer and hummed aloud a song she had taught him. He lived the old life over, but in a detached, impersonal sort of way, looking at the memory-pictures of his own life as if they were pictures in a book. The chief's voice, abruptly breaking the silence, startled him.

"It shall be done," said Makamuk. "The girl shall go down the river with you. But be it understood that I myself strike the three blows with the ax on your neck."

"But each time I shall put on the medicine," Subienkow answered, with a show of anxiety.

"You shall put the medicine on between each blow. Here are the hunters who shall see you do not escape. Go into the forest and gather your medicine."

Makamuk had been convinced of the worth of the medicine by the Pole's rapacity. Surely nothing less than the greatest of medicines could enable a man in the shadow of death to stand up and drive an old-woman's bargain.

"Besides," whispered Yakaga, when the Pole had disappeared with his guard among the spruce trees, "when you have learned the medicine you can easily destroy him."

"But how can I destroy him?" Makamuk argued. "His medicine will not let me destroy him."

"There will be some part where he has not rubbed the medicine," was Yakaga's reply. "We will de-

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stroy him through that part. It may be his ears. Very well; we will thrust a spear in one ear and out the other. Or it may be his eyes. Surely the medicine will be much too strong to rub on his eyes."

The chief nodded. "You are wise, Yakaga. If he possesses no other devil-things, we will then destroy him."

Subienkow did not waste time in the gathering of ingredients for his medicine. He selected whatever came to hand, such as spruce needles, the inner bark of the willow, a strip of birch bark, and a quantity of moss berries, which he made the hunters dig up for him from beneath the snow. A few frozen roots completed his supply, and he led the way back to camp.

Makamuk and Yakaga crouched beside him, noting the quantities and kinds of ingredients he dropped into the pot of water.

"You must be careful that the moss berries go in first," he explained. "And—oh, yes, one other thing—the finger of a man. Here, Yakaga, let me cut off your finger."

But Yakaga put his hands behind him and scowled.

"Just a small finger," Subienkow pleaded.

"Yakaga, give him your finger," Makamuk commanded.

"There be plenty of fingers lying around," Yakaga grunted, indicating the human wreckage in the snow of the score of persons who had been tortured to death.

"It must be the finger of a live man," the Pole objected.

"Then shall you have the finger of a live man." Yakaga strode over to the Cossack and sliced off a finger.

"He is not yet dead," he announced, flinging the bloody trophy in the snow at the Pole's feet. "Also, it is a good finger, because it is large."

Subienkow dropped it into the fire under the pot and began to sing. It was a French love song that with great solemnity he sang into the brew.

"Without these words I utter into it, the medicine is worthless," he explained. "The words are the chief strength of it. Behold, it is ready."

"Name the words slowly, that I may know them. "Makamuk demanded.

"Not until after the test. When the ax flies back three times from my neck, then will I give you the secret of the words."

"But if the medicine is not good medicine?" Makamuk queried anxiously.

Subienkow turned on him wrathfully.

"My medicine is always good. However, if it is not good, then do by me as you have done to the others." He pointed to the Cossack. "The medicine is now cool. Thus, I rub it on my neck, saying this further medicine."

With great gravity he slowly intoned a line of the *Marseillaise,* at

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the same time rubbing the villainous brew thoroughly, vigorously, into his neck.

An outcry interrupted his play-acting. The giant Cossack, with a last resurgence of his tremendous vitality, had arisen to his knees. Laughter and cries of surprise and applause arose from the Nulatos, as Big Ivan began flinging himself about in the snow with mighty spasms.

Subienkow was made sick by the sight, but he mastered his qualms and pretended to be angry.

"This will not do," he said. "Finish him, and then we will make the test. Here, you, Yakaga, see that his noise ceases."

While this was being done, Subienkow turned to Makamuk.

"And remember, you are to strike hard. This is not baby's work. Here, take the ax and strike the log, so I can see that you strike like a man."

Makamuk obeyed, striking twice, precisely and with vigor, cutting out a large chip.

"It is well." Subienkow looked about him at the circle of savage faces that somehow seemed to symbolize the wall of savagery that had hemmed him in ever since the Czar's police had first arrested him in Warsaw. "Take your ax, Makamuk, and stand so. I shall lie down. When I raise my hand, strike, and strike with all your might. And be careful that no one stands behind you. The medicine is good, and the ax may bounce from off my neck and right out of your hands."

He looked at the two sleds, with the dogs in harness, loaded with furs and fish. His rifle lay on top of the beaver skins. The six hunters who were to act as his guard stood by the sleds.

"Where is the girl?" the Pole demanded. "Bring her up to the sleds before the test goes on."

When this had been carried out, Subienkow lay down in the snow, resting his head on the log like a tired child about to sleep. He had lived so many dreary years that he was indeed tired.

"I laugh at you and your strength, O Makamuk," he said. "Strike, and strike hard."

He lifted his hand. Makamuk swung the ax, a broadax for the squaring of logs. The bright steel flashed through the frosty air, poised for a perceptible instant above Makamuk's head, then descended upon Subienkow's bare neck. Clear through flesh and bone it cut its way, biting deeply into the log beneath. The amazed savages saw the head bounce a yard away from the blood-spouting trunk.

There was a great bewilderment and silence, while slowly it began to dawn in their minds that there had been no medicine. The fur thief had outwitted them. Alone, of all their prisoners, he had escaped the torture. That had been the stake for which he played.

A great roar of laughter went

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up. Makamuk bowed his head in shame. The fur thief had fooled him. He had lost face before all his people.

Still they continued to roar out their laughter. Makamuk turned, and with bowed head stalked away. He knew that thenceforth he would be no longer known as Makamuk.

He would be Lost Face; the record of his shame would be with him until he died; and whenever the tribes gathered in the spring for the salmon, or in the summer for the trading, the story would pass back and forth across the campfires of how the fur thief died peaceably, at a single stroke, by the hand of Lost Face himself.

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DEAD ROSES

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

(continued from page 23)

He was sitting there brooding into his empty cup again. Her hand came to rest gently on his coat sleeve, to show him she was there. She didn't say anything about a date this time. He had no time for dates now. She had none either.

"Last night again," he said tersely. "I told you how it would be."

"Any luck so far?"

"Not a sign. He might just as well float through the air, for all the trace he leaves."

"He must have bought the flower upstairs in the dance hall. He must have been up there earlier and has been saving it since."

He shook his head. "Only one white rose was sold up there all night and to a man who had a different girl with him; we had the concessionaire look at the—" She saw him stop and gaze at her. "How did you know that? I didn't tell you they sold flowers up there."

"I—I must have read about it, somewhere."

"You couldn't have. It hasn't been in any of the papers. We've kept as much of it out of the papers as we could. Just let them print a bald statement that an unidentified body was found."

"I—I just imagined that they'd sell them in a place like that."

"I'm glad *you* don't go near places like that. I'm glad it couldn't happen to *you*," he said fervently.

He didn't know how close it had come to happening to her.

A white armband, seeming to float detachedly through the darkness like some sort of ghostly apparition, without any visible arm to support it, came to a halt in front of the doorway. A pocket-light winked on and threw a cartwheel of light against the doorway. The figure of a girl was revealed, pressed against one side of the wall. About five-feet six or seven, black hair cascading down her back, a cheap little coat belted around her. She put her hand to her face to ward off the light.

The air raid warden grunted, "That's not a very good place, but stay where you are until you hear the all-clear. It's due in another minute."

The light clicked off and the detached armband floated away on the darkness.

In two or three minutes the light had winked on again, this time far down the street. Pointed at somebody else, in another doorway. This time the cartwheel was no bigger than a poker chip, from where the girl peered out around the edge of her own sheltering-place. Who or what it fell on could not be seen. Then it snuffed out, and receded

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still farther into the night-blind distance.

The short blasts of the all-clear began to sound in the distance, coming nearer all the time as they were relayed from one siren to the next.

Ginny Trowbridge's foot made a soft little *tick* as it descended from the doorstep and she resumed her interrupted way along the street. A scanty light returned to the desolate scene, but somehow only made it more desolate. A car that had been parked two or three blocks away meshed gears and whined off into the distance, the sound carrying clearly in the new stillness that had followed the all-clear. A row of widely-separated street lights went on in unison and struggled in vain against the darkness. Hooded as they were, they only shone downward in a straight line, each one making a little pale puddle beneath itself.

Her shoes struck a clean-cut, brisk little tap along the echoing street. It was the only sound in the silence around her. It was as though she was the only thing moving in the whole spellbound city.

She passed the doorway where the warden's torch had given its second flicker of investigation. Its occupant, if there had been one, must already have left. It was an impenetrable mass of obscurity now. Yet she had a curious sense of someone's eyes being on her as she walked past it. She tried to shake it off but the dim feeling persisted.

She even turned her head to look back. At that very minute the glow from the nearest street light glanced over her, revealing her as in a snapshot. Then the tap of her footfalls went on into the darkness on the other side.

Suddenly it was no longer alone in the brooding stillness. Another tread had joined in, was subtly underscoring it, somewhere behind her. It was impossible to tell just when the accompaniment had set in. At the first moment of awareness it was already there, in full progress, blending in with the sharper rhythm of her own steps.

It was a quiet tread, unhurried and deliberate. At first it held no alarm for her. Somebody had left a second doorway, that was all. It might be that one she had passed just now, or it might be some other one.

It was easily recognizable as a man's tread. But it wasn't conspicuous. In fact, it was sometimes hard to catch at all. Then each time she thought it had died out, it would come back again.

It would diverge soon, go off in a direction of its own, she told herself. No two people were ever likely to maintain the same course for more than two or three blocks.

The two or three blocks passed and still it came on.

She put it to a test. She crossed over to the other side of the street. It would stay over on the first side

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now. It didn't. It crossed over after her. She could tell by the change in resonance when it stepped down and stepped up again on this side.

It was following her.

She came to a corner and turned down the side street. That would tell. That would be the final test.

It dwindled for a minute, then it rang out clear again. It had come around the corner after her.

It wasn't hurrying. It didn't seem to want to overtake her so much as to keep pace with her. It was patient. It was biding its time.

She quickened her steps. It quickened in turn. Then, though her impulse was to run, she forced herself to slacken, to come almost to a halt. The tempo of steps behind her slowed up. It did whatever she did. It was stalking her. She was its quarry.

She could have escaped. Not on foot, perhaps. But there was the subway into which it would probably not follow her. There were taxis. But she didn't want to escape. She wasn't trying to save her own skin. If she had wanted to, she wouldn't have been out alone on the streets.

She purposely tried to maneuver it into revealing itself, this anonymous tread that had no body. The dim-out regulations, even now that the lights were on again, didn't give her many opportunities. But she tried to use the few that existed. Store windows, which would have suited her purpose best of all, were all rigidly dark now that it was late. There remained only the street lights and an occasional building entrance. It skirted both types alike with satanic dexterity—sidled around the dark outside of the lights whenever she hoped to see it pass directly under them. The most she could ever see was an anonymous black outline gliding by just beyond the range of the light.

He—if it were he—was smart. While she was still alive, she wouldn't see him. Only when she was about to die would she see him. Then it would be too late. Terry had said, "Only the dead see him, and they can't tell about it afterward."

She had the courage to keep moving slowly ahead of him, but not enough courage to stand still, waiting for him to come up to her. She had to keep on walking—hoping that he would try soon.

He might be uncertain yet that she was the fever-image he took her to be. That might be the reason for the long delay in striking. She tried to egg him on, to convince him. When she came to a place where there was slightly better light, she stopped and held herself under it, almost posing, turning this way and that as if uncertain of her direction. Even from a distance her height, her black hair and all the other details must have stood out conspicuously.

The death-tread had stopped when she did, waiting for her to

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go on. He was watching. Her skin crept, remembering those others. She glanced up at the street sign for a touch of security. Then she went on again. Certainly he would strike now that he had seen her under the light and had noticed how much she looked like that first one.

She saw that she'd been right. Almost at once the tread was faster. It was closing in now. Closing in for the kill. Her heart started to pound. It was hard to make her feet maintain their former pace, to keep from running. She pressed her fingers through the soft leather of her handbag to feel the reassuring shape of the small gun. That had a steadying effect.

He was trying to catch up quietly now. His feet were a whisper on the pavement. He was coming closer every minute.

She'd better get the gun out, or at least have it ready.

About twenty yards now. Maybe even less. There was a dark stretch immediately behind her that she'd just passed through. If she turned now, close as he was, she still wouldn't be able to recognize him. There was another light coming, up ahead. If he only waited until she could reach that.

Without any warning there was a slurring sound directly beside her and the white top of a police patrol car swam up to the curb.

One of the men in it called out, "Are you in trouble, miss? You seem to be walking kind of funny."

There was no sound of retreat from back there. The footsteps had simply melted away into nothingness, vanishing from the face of the earth as if they had never existed. He was gone—already beyond recall. It was no good telling them, they'd never get him. And even if they got someone, they could only hold him as a suspicious character. They could never prove what he'd been about to do. You can't convict on intention alone.

"Why don't you mind your own business?" she flared. "If I wanted police protection, I would have called for it!"

There was a shocked pause. Then the car glided on without another word from its occupants.

After a while she turned and started back along the way she had just come.

She wasn't in any danger now, she knew. She wouldn't meet him again even if she walked the rest of the night looking for him. He was too smart.

She came back to the preceding light—the one before which it had so nearly happened. She stopped short. There was something under her foot. She moved back a step and looked down. A white flower lay where it had been dropped only a moment before.

This time it was she who had the doleful face when she walked into "The Greek's." She slumped down beside him without saying

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hello. She held her head pillowed against her hand as she handed him the newspaper she'd been carrying tucked under her arm. It was folded carefully.

"What's the matter? More about The Rose Killer?" he asked.

"Not this time. Read the gossip column."

The third item down said: "What daughter of a socially prominent family is that way about a detective and waits for him outside the station house in her limousine every night, private chauffeur and all? Mama says no, not until he gets his man."

She laughed bitterly. "When did I ever wait for you outside the station house, with a limousine or without it?"

"This is just around the corner. I suppose that's what he means." He smiled bleakly.

"They held a big family war-council over me just now. Feathered headdresses and everything. I was asked to give my word I wouldn't see you any more. I refused, of course. So I'm to be exiled. Our summer place out on Long Island, all by myself, with just an old-lady caretaker who lives out there."

"Maybe they're right. Why don't you listen to them?" he suggested.

"Are you on their side too?" she asked scornfully.

"No, I'm on ours," he said quietly. "When are you leaving?"

"Right away. Edwards is driving me out in the car. I just slipped out to let you know." She handed him a slip of paper. "This is where I'll be, in case you want to reach me. Here's the address and the phone number. Don't lose it. But I'll be in again. They can't stop me. There are trains and buses. I'll meet you here in 'The Greek's' every time it's your night off, just as we've been doing right along. Look for me."

"That's a date," he said. "I'll be waiting."

"I've got to get back now, before they miss me and get my scalp." The last thing she said was, "We'll get The Rose Killer, Terry, and you'll have your promotion. Then I'm marrying you whether they like it or not, and they can whistle."

He thought that "we" was just a slip of the tongue. She'd meant to say "you," of course.

He sat there looking after her. She was a great girl, he thought.

She kept watching him through the glass while she dialed the number with one finger. Sitting at the little table, his back was to her. He couldn't watch her phoning.

This time she was sure of it. This time there would be no mistake as in the first time, and no slip-up as in the second. While the slots of the dial whirred around, she recapitulated the results of a whole evening of research.

He was English, and freely admitted it. That was nothing in it-

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self. But he'd incautiously given her the date of his arrival, and that *was* something. May fifteenth last. The first of the white rose killings had taken place on the seventh of June. She had the exact date from Terry. In other words, those killings had begun exactly three weeks after the time of his arrival. But there was something even more incriminating than that. From Tom she'd obtained a calendar of past blackouts, giving the dates on which they'd occurred throughout the year. The one on the seventh of June, which was the one coinciding with the first murder, was also the *first one* to have occurred following his arrival. His arrival and the murders and the blackouts were all in perfect synchronization.

Terry might call all this circumstantial, but there was more to it than that. She'd been followed the other night by the actual Rose Killer. She was positive of that.

She'd tested him just now on their way to this place. It hadn't been easy to manage, but she'd accomplished it. She'd pretended to stop and look into a shop window. Then she had sent him down to the corner ahead of her, on the excuse of looking to see whether a bus was coming or not. Then she beckoned him to come back, as if she wanted to point out something in the window to him. He'd rejoined her at an easy strolling gait, about the same as the other night. She'd strained her ears.

Just as no two people have the same fingerprints, no two people have exactly the same footfall. She had a good ear for music and she knew her ears weren't playing her false. The pace, the weight of body, the bulk of shoe, were all the same.

It was incredible that she should have met him a second time like this. She'd had a stroke of luck. She'd met him at a flower show, an annual exhibit. Seen him hovering around the white roses there. Others just admired them and passed on. But even when he'd finally moved along to other displays, he still kept looking over at them.

She questioned the supervisor in charge of that particular display. That same man had been in every day since the show had first opened. These white roses seemed to exert an irresistible attraction to him. They innocently supposed he was some amateur fancier who specialized in them. She didn't.

Now he was with her—waiting at the table for her. There wasn't any blackout scheduled for tonight, or Tom would have let her know. But this time she wouldn't wait for him to make the first move. Terry could break him down. They had ways. If it took weeks or months, they'd keep at it once they got their hands on him. And that was her job right now, to put him into those hands.

Some stupid desk-sergeant got on. "Get Terry for me, hurry! I

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haven't very much time. Please!"

He seemed to take forever. Finally he spoke up again. "He's not here right now. Off duty tonight. If this is police business, you better tell me what it is and I can get you someone else."

It was Terry she wanted to have the promotion. She had to get him. "The Greek's"! Of course— she should have remembered that sooner. It was Tuesday and he would be there, waiting for her. Her finger started toward the dial once more.

He'd got up and was coming over. No, he was going toward the door. He was walking out on her.

She came out fast and caught up with him just as he reached the entrance.

"Do you always go into a telephone booth when you want to powder your nose?"

She thought he hadn't been watching! His back had been toward her the whole time. Maybe he'd used a cigarette case as a mirror.

"I'm afraid I'll have to leave you now. I have an appointment," he said.

Something had made him uneasy. She'd overplayed her hand in some way. Maybe by asking him one question too many. Or maybe that acoustic test out on the sidewalk before.

She had to string along with him at any cost, until she had a chance to put in another call to Terry at "The Greek's." No matter how she worked it, she mustn't lose sight of him until then.

"Well, wait, let me come along with you just as far as—"

He felt her sudden start as they came out onto the sidewalk. "What's the matter?" he asked, turning to look at her.

It was the car. She would have known it anywhere. It had just driven up. Complete to the monogram on the door. For a minute she had a vision of her mother and the other members of the family stepping out and confronting her in all their majesty. But there was only Edwards in it.

"Hurry up, let's get away from here fast!" She began to tug at her suspect's sleeve. "There's someone who knows me in that car."

They took a few quick steps together away from the entrance, trying to escape into the darkness. The hunter and hunted were both in the same boat now. Edwards had already seen her. His hail came after her. "Miss Trowbridge!"

The car-door slapped open, there was a throb of overtaking footsteps behind them, and she found herself separated from her companion and at bay against the wall.

"I'm sorry, miss, but I must speak to you a minute." Edwards touched his cap to her respectfully, but he was still blocking her way.

She tried to thrust him aside. "That man! Where'd that man I was just with go?"

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He'd vanished as completely as if he'd been whisked out of sight on a wire. Gone again, just when she thought she had him. Well, now she knew what he looked like, but all that painstaking work had been a waste.

She whirled on Edwards in a fury. "What do you want? What do you mean by doing such a thing?

"You'd better come with me at once, miss. I've been looking everywhere for you. Your mother's been taken seriously ill."

"Where is she, here in town?"

"No, miss, she's out at the country place. I drove her out myself shortly before dinner. She wanted to pay you a surprise visit. I imagine the shock of not finding you there had a great deal to do with it."

"Is she quite bad?"

"She had the doctor with her when I left. I imagine it will help some as soon as she sees you."

She didn't wait to hear any more; she stepped into the car in a hurry. "You'd better drive fast, Edwards."

"I'll do my best, miss."

There were only two or three dim lights to be seen behind the windows when they finally turned in the driveway. One of them was in the room habitually occupied by her mother whenever she stayed at the country place.

She jumped out of the car, ran up the steps, and used her own key on the door without waiting to be admitted. "Thank you, Edwards. I'll leave the door open for you while you're putting the car away. I'll go right up and see how she is!"

She ran up the inside staircase, stopping before her mother's door. She knocked firmly. "Mother. Mother, are you all right? Is the doctor in there with you?"

There was no answer.

She grasped the knob and opened the door.

The room was empty. The bed was undisturbed. It was just as it had been left on her mother's last visit. She stood there stunned.

Then the implication slowly percolated through her. She knew what it was. She turned—terrified—to look toward the stairs. The front door. She could still keep him out, if she got down to it before he. . . .

She ran back to the head of the stairs, then stopped with a sickening jolt. He was standing inside the door and it was already closed. He'd just finished locking it and drawing the bolt.

He reached into his pocket and she saw him take out a knife. He opened the blade with quick thumb-pressure. She didn't understand in time, thinking it was meant to be a weapon of attack. He squatted down on his heels, close up against the wall, and sawed away at something just over the baseboard. Two ends of wire sprang out. The telephone. He'd

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cut it. Then he calmly put the knife away again.

He looked up and saw her standing there, frozen. He was very natural about everything. His whole attitude was calm and rational. No frenzied mania, no popping eyes, no foaming mouth. You wouldn't have known what was on his mind.

"So you've been trying to get The Rose Killer," he said. "I could have told you that you'd never get him. Because I'm The Rose Killer myself. Driving you and your whole family around day after day. Sitting there right in front of you the whole time."

She saw him unfastening a cuff link, to give his arm a better swing. In that cold, trivial action there was more undiluted horror than in ten berserk rages.

The real thing at last, but what good did it do her to know that now? Right under the same roof with her the whole time, while she went out night after night hunting for him all over town! But, as Terry had said, you could be around him for weeks at a time and never guess.

"But he said you were mad—that you didn't know any better! You *know* I'm not that girl in England. Look at me. You *know* I'm Ginny Trowbridge."

"I'm not mad. Not this time." He started coming up the stairs.

She fled back along the upper hall. "Mrs. Crosby!" she shrieked at the top of her lungs.

"I don't think she'll hear you," she heard him say. The way he said it sounded twice as quiet after the shattering way she'd just screamed. She got to the caretaker's room, flung the door wide, jabbed at the light switch. "Mrs. Crosby, help me!"

Mrs. Crosby didn't move. She'd gone to bed, and the bed wasn't disturbed much. You could hardly tell. Only, the pillow was *over* her face instead of under it. There was a hollow in it, punched by someone's knee that had pressed down hard.

She didn't scream this time. She smothered it in her hands.

He was coming up slowly. He was so sure of her that he was taking his time.

She fled from room to room, looking for something, anything, with which to defend herself. There wasn't even a gun in the place. The one she owned had been left behind her in the city. She found a hammer in a linen closet at the back of the hall. It wasn't a large one, but it was the only thing there was. She might be able to stun him long enough to get the door-key out of his pocket or to break one of the lower-floor windows and get out that way.

She went back into her own room and got into position behind the door, leaving it half ajar. She knew she was only going to have a chance for one blow. It had to count. She gripped the hammer

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with both hands and held it poised.

She could hear him coming up slowly, a step at a time, with the deliberation of a machine. She nearly went a little mad herself, waiting for him to get to her room.

He stopped just outside the door. She went up on her toes. He started to push the door slowly inward. It swung around and left his head exposed, sidewise to her, making a perfect target. She swung with all her strength.

She could feel the sudden loss of weight as she swept it forward. She knew what had happened even before she heard it bounce off the wall behind her. The hammer-head had flown off. Just the stick part fell harmlessly across his skull, not heavy enough to do anything but sting him a little.

He swung around and wrenched it from her hands. She scuttled back along the wall, like a mouse looking for a hole. He caught up with her on the other side of the room, over by the window. The chase stopped.

Her flailing hand went down into something soft. Earth—around a potted plant standing on the inside window-ledge. It went over with a shattering crash, but not before she'd got a handful of it. She waited until his eyes were so close to her face she couldn't miss. She didn't.

He was blinded for a minute, pawing helplessly at his eyes. She ducked under his arm, streaked across to the door and out. She knew she'd never get downstairs in time, so she went up instead, heading for the roof. He was quicker than she'd thought he'd be. He tore out after her, nearly at her heels. There was a lightweight rattan settee just short of the roof staircase. She threw that over, blocking him. He went sprawling over it. She got up to the top, opened the trap door, and climbed out into the open.

The roof was gabled and covered with treacherous slates. She skidded down them as far as a squat brick chimney. She got below it and held on with both arms. She couldn't go any lower than that. It sloped down to a leaded rain-gutter and then dropped off into space.

She heard him coming after her. He must have seen her arms looped around the chimney. Some of the slates detached themselves at his unseen approach and went slithering past where she crouched.

Suddenly a hand touched her arm. It was ice-cold—like the fingers of death. She screamed and tore her arms away—or tried to. One swung out free, but he'd caught the other by the wrist. Braced on the other side of the chimney, he held her in an iron grip. She dangled there, legs threshing helplessly against the slates.

A light suddenly slashed up at them from below, blinding her. It was the adjustable spotlight of a

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car. She heard a voice cry out hoarsely, "Good heavens, look at the two of them!" There were figures moving around down there on the lawn, but they were too late. They might as well not have come.

Terry's voice reached her from far away, as in a dream. Crooning in reassurance, and yet half wild with smothered terror. "Ginny girl, edge over, edge over, pull more of his arm out!"

She braced herself against the unstable slates, then hitched violently away from the chimney, almost leaning flat against the roof. His hand came around the corner of the chimney, still welded to hers. His wrist came, then a little of his forearm. But he was strong. She couldn't pull him any farther.

Something went *bang!* and chips of brick flew off. Something went *bang!* again, and the hand jarred open. She was prone against the roof. She just skidded a little farther down and stayed there, hanging on by a hair's-breath.

Something came tumbling down around the other side of the chimney and over into the night, clawing at nothing as it went.

The light went out, in order not to blind her and make her lose her precarious hold. She was all by herself now. She knew that all she had to do was just hang on a little while longer. Then Terry climbed out against the night-sky over her, with a rope around him. He came scaling down to where she was and his reassuring arms went around her.

In the car, on the way back to the city, they talked about it.

"They'll give you your promotion now," she said.

"I'm not sure that you shouldn't have it instead."

"How did you get out there when you did?"

"Nothing very brilliant. It was my night off and you'd promised to meet me at 'The Greek's. You never break your word. If you couldn't come I knew you would have called me there or sent some message. That brought on a hunch that something was wrong. It was just a hunch, but I couldn't fight it down. So finally I gave in to it. Then when I couldn't reach the place by telephone, I remembered that you'd said this caretaker was out here at all times, and that did the rest."

"There's only one thing I don't understand. That man I was with earlier tonight . . . He seemed to fit the specifications so perfectly."

He laughed. "I heard about that. He told us about it afterwards. You were a little wide of the mark that time. Know who that was? A Scotland Yard man, sent over here to work on the case. He's been in for several conferences with us."

"But he *followed* me the other night! The tread was the same!"

"I wouldn't be surprised. He might have had some idea of using you as live bait. The cat following

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the cheese in hopes of seeing the rat go for it."

"I'm afraid I wasn't very good as your deputy—confusing detectives with criminals."

"You got him, didn't you? And neither Scotland Yard nor Center Street did. Pretty good for one little girl on her own."

"There's just one thing more. There was no blackout tonight. Why did he go for me like that? I thought it was only during . . ."

"He must have recognized the man he saw you with as a Yard operative. Maybe he'd already seen him during some previous investigation over there. When he saw the two of you together like that, he was afraid you were beginning to suspect him, thought you might be on the point of divulging his identity and whereabouts, if you hadn't already. That was enough to bring on the so-called shock without the aid of any blackout. Only it was a very sane, level-headed 'shock' in this case. He knew what he was doing. Well, the fall to the ground did what the hangman's rope was waiting to do, and a lot more cheaply—broke his neck."

She pressed her face against his coat. "I'm glad it's over."

"Sure. It's all over and done with now. In a little while you'll forget all about it."

"All but one thing. I'll never be able to look at a white rose again as long as I live."

NEXT MONTH .

A brand-new story by an acknowledged New Master—the first of a new group of four short stories by Stanley Ellin—each one a mystery gem not be missed by any mystery buff. These four new stories were written especially for *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine,* and we are proud to announce the first of this group in next month's issue—

STANLEY ELLIN's *The Day of the Bullet*

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a new story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

The Invisible Loot

EDITOR'S FILE CARD

AUTHOR: MICHAEL GILBERT

TITLE: *The Invisible Loot*

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Petrella

LOCALE: London

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Petrella has been promoted—he is now an Inspector. And here is his first case at Gabriel Street Police Station—and a lollapaloosa-lulu it is!*

MR. CORNSTALK, AN EMPLOYEE of British Railways, working in the main-line signal box at Waterloo, was on early shift—which meant that he had to be on duty by five o'clock each morning, leaving his house in Watchet Street (S.E.) shortly before half-past four. As he ran down his front steps he noticed that the side door of Mr. Prince's shop opposite was standing ajar.

Now Mr. Prince, like all Pawnbrokers and Jewellers, was a most meticulous locker-up. His windows were covered each night with heavy shutters, bolted on the inside, padlocked on the outside, and all his doors were double locked.

A glance convinced Mr. Cornstalk that something was amiss. There was a newly sawn hole in one of the panels of the door, about halfway up, and through it he could see the remains of the heavy lock, dangling from a couple of screws. He wondered what to do about it. The last thing he wanted was to make himself late for work. On the other hand, Mr. Prince was an old friend. A compromise occurred to him. He knew Mr. Prince's home telephone number, and there was a kiosk on the corner of the street.

All of which accounts for the fact that Detective Inspector Patrick Petrella and Detective Sergeant Croft,

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both showing signs of men who have been urgently dragged from their beds, were in Watchet Street with the outraged Mr. Prince before half-past five had struck.

"It's not the stuff that's gone I mind about so much," said Mr. Prince. "Of course, it's not properly covered, but I should get something for it—" (from which Petrella, who was not inexperienced in these matters, gathered that Mr. Prince was heavily over-insured)—"it's all this mess and damage. Looks like he done it on purpose. Why did he have to wreck the counter, for instance? There wasn't any call to do that."

He pointed to the old mahogany surface, polished by fifty years of care and use, now criss-crossed by a dozen burns. In some of them were embedded the ashes of the cigarette which had been laid down there.

"I'm afraid it's one of the things burglars do," said Petrella. "Wanton damage. It sort of relieves their feelings."

"Tchah," said Mr. Prince.

"It sometimes helps us catch 'em too. We might be able to bounce this one if we're quick. Get onto Scotland Yard, Croft, and see if the C.R.O. can turn up something for us."

"Those boys at Central," said Sergeant Croft. "They're civil servants. They come on duty at harpass nine and they go home at harpass five."

"I think," said Petrella patiently, "that they've got some arrangement for emergencies. If you get hold of the Night Duty Officer he'll tell you all about it."

He spoke patiently because he had not found himself getting on as well as he should have with Sergeant Croft, who was over fifty and, though sound on essentials, beginning to go sour from lack of promotion.

The Criminal Records Office, in Petrella's experience, answered your inquiries in one of two ways. Either it was feeling cautious, in which case it gave you a list of a hundred and fifty "possibles" without expressing any particular preference for any of them; or else it made bold and inspired guesses. That morning it was in Delphic form. His inquiry produced a single, prompt, and red-hot tip.

"Carson (William) alias Cranston, alias Causton alias Crawford. Previous convictions"—(there were a lot of those, mostly shop breaking)—"method of entry, side or back door, panel drilled, hole cut with key hole or taper saw, lock or catch plate levered off . . . chain smoker when at work . . . uses a bicycle for transport. Last known address: 17 Marsh Close, S.E. 11."

The latest date stamp on the report was three months old. Carson might have moved half a dozen times since then. Professional burglars were birds of passage. On the other hand, he might not.

Petrella said to Sergeant Croft,

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"Get the car—we're going visiting."

It was then twenty past seven. At half-past seven the door of No. 17 Marsh Close was being opened to them by a stout lady in a kimono. She said, "Good morning, Sergeant." There was no need to inquire their business. Like head lice and debt collectors, police were endemic in Marsh Close.

"He's second floor back," she said. "Don't you boys make more noise than you must. The lady in the next room's expecting her first and she needs her sleep."

Petrella said, "Did you happen to notice when Carson got in?"

"He's got his key," said the old lady indifferently. "I don't keep tabs on him. Matter of fact, I did think I heard him go up about half an hour ago. Probably working nights. He'll be in bed by now."

Carson was not only in bed, he was asleep, with a happy smile on his face, and enveloped in a light but not unpleasant aura of Scotch whiskey.

"Sleeping like a baby," said Sergeant Croft. "No night starvation there. Seems a pity to disturb him, really."

"Might have a look at his shoes and clothes before we disturb him," suggested Petrella.

Carson, brought back to the land of reality, was not surprised by their visit, and not resentful.

"Do the bed first," he said, "then I can get back in it."

They found nothing—not even a saw blade, a screwdriver, or a chisel. By the time they had finished, Carson was asleep again. The ambulance came for the woman next door as they were leaving, and they followed her down the stairs, flushed and important with impending maternity.

After breakfast Sergeant Croft brought in the night reports from the uniformed branch.

"No wonder ol' Carson was sleepy," he said. "He must've had quite a night."

Petrella read, in the careful, boyish-handwriting of Constable Warren, "At 6:50 a.m. I stopped a bicyclist at the corner of Craigavon Street and Water Street. I recognized him as a man named Carson with previous convictions for house and shop breaking. There was a canvas bag fastened to the carrier of the bicycle. In view of his record I asked Carson if he had any objection to me examining the bag. He said, go ahead. I found the bag to be empty."

"There's something wrong with those times," said Petrella. "Carson was away from Watchet Street by half-past four—"

"He wouldn't leave it quite as late as that," said Croft. "If he'd cased the job properly he must've known that—what was that railway man's name—Beanstalk—left his house at half-past four."

"All right. Say four o'clock. The Constable on the beat reported all

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correct at two o'clock. That gives him two hours for the job. Break the door. Open two steel cabinets."

"I couldn't do it," agreed Croft, "but Carson's an expert. Two hours is about right."

"Well," said Petrella, "he leaves at four, on his bicycle. Ten to seven—seven!—he turns up in Craigavon Street. How far can you go on a bicycle in nearly three hours?"

"Thirty miles."

"That's what I mean. It doesn't make sense. Carson's got a fence lined up. Probably somewhere handy. His one idea's to get rid of the stuff—and his kit too—as quick as he damned well can, and get back to bed. It's possible, before it gets light. But what's he doing still hanging round at ten to seven and drawing attention to himself?"

"Perhaps he couldn't contact the fence."

"I don't believe it. It stands out a mile he'd got all the details fixed up beforehand. Get someone onto finding out if anyone actually saw Carson between, say, half-past four and half-past six."

It was an unexplained fact—a single, awkward piece that would not fit into an otherwise smooth pattern. The matter might easily have been shelved and forgotten, had not Petrella's mid-morning cup of coffee brought with it Detective Superintendent Benjamin.

The Superintendent operated from the main divisional station, at Causeway, and was in charge of all Criminal Investigations in X Division, that roaring jungle of factories, cinemas, shops, pubs, and railway yards which fills the main loop of the River Thames and spills itself southward toward New Cross and the Kentish hills. He was a tall, thin, Lincolnshireman, and Petrella liked what he had seen of him so far. Particularly he appreciated the fact that he had been left almost alone in his first three months at Gabriel Street substation.

They talked shop for a few minutes, but it was clear that the Superintendent had come to say something, and at last, without more ado, he said it.

"Do you own a private bank account?"

"Yes," said Petrella. "I've had one for about three years."

"How often do you see a bank statement?"

"I don't know. I should think about once or twice a year. They don't bother you much unless you're overdrawn."

"I'd advise you to ask for it once a month from now on," said the Superintendent.

Petrella stared at him.

"Did it never occur to you to wonder why your predecessor, a young and enterprising chap like Jimmy Carver, should have been moved from a divisional post here and given a clerical job at Scotland Yard?"

"I never thought about it at all," said Petrella. "To tell you the truth,

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I was too pleased at getting promotion and a Station of my own."

"Can't blame you," said Benjamin. He paused so long that Petrella thought he might have changed his mind about what he was going to say. Then the Superintendent said, "We'd been having a lot of trouble with shop breaking. Jewellers and such like chiefly. Not tiaras, or priceless matching pearls, but signet rings, watches, cigarette lighters. A good profit in it if you handle it in bulk, and someone was doing just that. We knew the operators pretty well, but we could never catch them with anything on 'em. We thought we knew the organizer, too. A man called Bonny."

The name stirred a memory.

"Bonny for Value," said Petrella. "Doesn't he run a shop in Harp Street? Calls itself Government Surplus. Sells almost everything."

"That's him. And a shop like that might be fine cover for a receiver, don't you think? That was our first idea, too. But it didn't turn out like that. There are depths in Mr. Bonny. Depths beyond depths."

"You'd be able to check on the stuff he was offering."

"We had stooges go in and buy things which we then traced back to the retailer and the maker. That was routine."

"And it was all good stuff?"

"I wouldn't say it was good stuff," said the Superintendent, "but it certainly wasn't stolen—at least, not by our records. Some of it came from abroad, and was difficult to trace. Some was salvage—sold up in job lots by the Insurance Company that had had to pay out on a fire claim. Some was bankrupt stock. That sort of thing."

"But legitimate?"

"Oh, yes. One parcel, for instance, we traced back to its actual sale, by Order of the Sheriff's Court in Inverness. Another lot came from Cardiff. He has nation-wide connections, has our Mr. Bonny."

"Might he be running a legitimate business in his shop, and a receiving end at his house? But, of course, you'd have thought of that."

"Yes," said the Superintendent, "we thought of that. And we kept his house under general observation. It's a big, rambling old place, in half an acre of garden, up in Gosselin Park."

"Five minutes from Craigavon Street."

"That's right. Why?"

"It fits in with something that happened this morning," said Petrella. "Please go on, sir."

"Most of our suspects were seen in the neighborhood from time to time. In the end I thought we had a strong enough case, so I got a warrant and organized a search—which I entrusted to your predecessor."

"And he found nothing?"

"There was nothing to find—not when he made his search. I'm quite satisfied about that. But three months later a rather disturbing

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fact came to light. A cheque for £50 had been paid into Inspector Carver's private bank account three days *before the search*. It was signed by Mr. Bonny. He said he had paid for some spare-time decorating and building work that Carver had done for him. Carver said he knew nothing about it. But the trouble was, he'd drawn against it."

"He could do that without knowing it was there," said Petrella.

"Certainly he could. That's why I suggested you look at your own account monthly."

"I'll look at Mr. Bonny, too," said Petrella.

That afternoon he made his way down to Harp Street. Modesty was not one of Mr. Bonny's failings. From a clear fifty yards Petrella could read the six-inch-high red letters *BONNY FOR VALUE*, and beneath, in equally prominent style, the legend *EVERYTHING FOR EVERYONE*. The triple windows of the shop were crammed with duffle coats, primus stoves, knee-length rubber boots, barometers, sets of spanners, signet rings, fountain pens, balaclava helmets, crockery, camp chairs, sunglasses, socks. It was a dreamlike quartermasters stores. As Petrella stood examining its riches, his eye was caught by a prominently placed tray. *Admiralty Surplus Stop Watches,* said the notice, *Buy now. This sacrifice cannot be repeated.*

Petrella felt in his pocket and fetched out a copy of the list he had compiled, in his own hand, in the early hours of that morning. His memory had not deceived him. One of the things Mr. Prince had lost had been a dozen, precision-made, stop watches. He had valued them at £15 each.

Petrella pushed open the door and went in.

He had little doubt that the personage who came forward to serve him was Mr. Bonny himself. He was so red, so inflated, so genial, so pleased with himself that it could have been none other.

"A stop watch?" he said. "You have a keen eye for a bargain, young man. I put a dozen in the window this morning and—you can see for yourself—only five left. Four pounds ten apiece. Anyone in their senses would charge you five guineas. A wonderful chance."

Petrella agreed with him. It seemed almost too good to be true. It was fortunate that he happened to have four pounds and some silver with him.

"Shall I wrap it or is it for personal use perhaps?"

"Oh, it's for me."

"Then you'll need a chain. Here we are. Heavy-plated links. Five bob to anyone else. Four and sixpence to you."

Petrella settled for four and sixpence.

"A wonderful timekeeper," said Mr. Bonny. "With that watch, Inspector, you'll never be late on duty. Give my love to all the boys up at

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the Station. Be seeing more of you I hope. Goodbye for now."

"Goodbye," said Petrella. He had exactly fourpence left, in coppers, and he used it to telephone Gabriel Street for a car. Ten minutes later he was showing his watch, but not very hopefully now, to Mr. Prince.

"Not bad," said Mr. Prince. "No. It's not one of mine. It's not really what you'd call a jeweller's job. How much did you give for it? Four pounds ten? If you'd told me you wanted one I'd have picked you one up for about three-fifteen wholesale."

Petrella drove back to Gabriel Street in silence. When he got there he went into his office and reflected for ten whole minutes before lifting up the receiver and asking for an outside line. He dialed the private exchange number of New Scotland Yard, and when the operator answered, he asked to be put through to Detective Inspector Carver.

"No, I don't mind talking about it," said Carver, stirring his tea. "I'm gradually getting over the feeling of having been kicked in the stomach. If you land him, best of luck to you. He was too fast for me."

They had met, at Petrella's suggestion, in a first-storey tea shop which looks out on Big Ben and observes odd hours to accommodate police officers off duty.

"There was just enough in his story to make it look fishy. I do a bit of decorating in my spare time —round my own house and for friends. And Bonny had had a couple of rooms done up—but not by me."

"It seems to me," said Petrella, "now that you don't have to endorse cheques, anyone can go round paying money into anyone's account."

"That's right," said Carver. "Then they said I'd drawn against it. What the hell! I never know what I've got in till I get a dirty letter from my Bank Manager, then I back pedal a bit."

"Same as everyone. Tell me about the raid."

"If I'd been a betting man," said Carver, "and you'd asked me to lay some odds, I'd have said it was a hundred to one on we were going to strike oil that morning. We'd tightened up the observation on Bonny's house. It isn't an easy place to watch. Stands in a big garden, runs down to the railway at the back, and there's plenty of trees and bushes. You'd need twenty men to be sure no one came in or out. But we'd got a good spot nearly opposite the gate and we'd seen 'Dicky' Bird go in at four o'clock the previous afternoon—and if *he* didn't do the Corner Store job I don't know who did. And not only that. We pulled back at night, so's not to disturb him, but one of the men swears he saw Parsons sniffing round at six o'clock the next morning. And that means another packet of stuff was on its way in. Right?"

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"Sounds convincing to me," said Petrella.

"When I rang the bell at nine o'clock next morning I thought it was going to be a walkover. The stuff we were looking for—you couldn't push it down the crack between two floorboards, you follow me? It would have filled a couple of shoe boxes. But when I saw old Bonny's face—well, I began to wonder. You know how bloody pleased with himself he looks."

"Yes," said Petrella. "Yes, I know."

"He was grinning like a Cheshire cat. Come in, Inspector, come in. What can I do for you this lovely morning? Blah, blah, blah. I told him what we wanted, and he said, Go ahead. I can promise you we didn't leave a square inch unlooked. We'd a team from Central. Those boys can see through a foot of concrete. That house was clean, I'm telling you."

"The garden?"

"We'd a bit of luck there. It was a sharp, frosty morning. Inches of white hoar-frost on the ground. You could see the prints on the path of the people who'd been up it—milkman and paper boy and so on. And no one had put a foot into the garden at all. If they had, they'd have left a trail—well, you couldn't have missed it."

"And what was your idea about it?"

Big Ben suddenly spoke out the quarter, and Carver waited till it had finished. Then he said, "My idea was the same as the Superintendent's. With one important difference. It stuck out a mile that Bonny had had a tipoff. He'd shifted the stuff 'Dicky' Bird brought in the day before. And if we *were* right about Parsons—well, he'd just told him to come back later. Either way it adds up to the same answer. He knew he was going to be raided."

"Who else was in it besides you?"

"The Superintendent organized it. He laid on the searchers for Scotland Yard. And I'd told Sergeant Croft."

"Yes," said Petrella. "I see."

It was after seven when he got back to Gabriel Street, but he pulled out all the files of the shop breakings in the past six months and started to skim through them again. He soon found the one he wanted—a watch shop in the New Kent Road. There were reports on it from the investigating officer, who had soon concluded that it was the work of an Irish expert known as Patsy Parsons. The report was endorsed with the common form "insufficient evidence to justify arrest." Petrella noticed from the file that the breaking must have taken place after midnight but before four o'clock, when the patrolling constable had noticed that the night warning light had been extinguished and had gone in to investigate.

Four o'clock—six o'clock. Another unexplained gap. Even on

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foot it could hardly have taken more than half an hour for Patsy to get from the New Kent Road to Gosselin Park.

Petrella sat at his desk for a long time, the open files in front of him. He felt cold, and puzzled and uncomfortable. And behind and beyond everything else he felt a growing anger. At Highside, where he had served before, first as a Constable and then as a Detective Sergeant, he had experienced the minor frustrations of a policeman's life; but he had never known this sort of shambles where the Superintendent distrusted the Inspector, the Inspector the Sergeant, and the Sergeant—who did Sergeant Croft suspect? If he were not guilty himself probably he was going round nursing suspicions of someone else.

"Curse Mr. Bonny and all his works," said Petrella aloud to the silent room. "Curse a legal system that sets such store by presumptions of innocence, but allows no weight for presumptions of guilt. How the devil am I to get at him, triple armed as he is in the armor of undetected crime."

In the silence which succeeded this outburst the sudden shrilling of the telephone nearly frightened him out of his wits. He realized that a line must have been left through to his office when the exchange went off duty.

"Gabriel Street Station," he said. "Inspector Petrella here."

"Oh, Inspector. How lucky I caught you. This is Mr. Bonny—you remember—?"

"Yes," said Petrella. "As a matter of fact, I was just thinking about you."

"I wonder if you could come along. Something rather upsetting."

Petrella drove himself up to Gosselin Park. The front gate was open and the porch light was on. Mr. Bonny had the door open before Petrella was out of the car.

"Quick work," he said. "Come in, come in. Along here on the right. This is my little Snuggery." It struck Petrella as exactly the sort of room a man might have made up out of pictures in early numbers of *The Strand Magazine,* full of mahogany and red plush and Benares brass. The electric light fittings looked fifty years out of date and there was a genuine tantalus on the table.

"Imagine my feelings," said Mr. Bonny. "I always go round, when I get home in the evenings. Had I neglected to do so—!"

He pulled aside the long, plum-colored curtains which covered French windows, leading to the garden. They had been equipped, Petrella saw, with an up-to-date burglar-proof lock, but a lock which didn't look quite right. He examined it more closely.

"Yes," he said. "Lucky you noticed it. Someone's taken it apart and put it back without the tongue. It isn't locking anything at all." He pushed on the window and it

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swung open. He stepped through and found himself on a small, tiled loggia. Ahead of him the garden sloped down into the darkness. The railway, he knew, lay somewhere at the foot of it.

When he came back Mr. Bonny was pouring out two generous whiskies.

"Have you got any ideas about this?" he said.

"Ideas," said Mr. Bonny. "Certainly I've got ideas. Do you know that the contents of this house are valued for insurance purposes, at ten thousand pounds? That's a Morland over the mantelpiece, Inspector."

Petrella looked at the two constipated horses with respect, and said, "What I really meant was, have you any idea who could have tampered with the lock? It looks to me like an inside job."

"Inside," said Mr. Bonny. "Impossible. There's only old Mrs. Jacket, my housekeeper. She's been with me for years, and is nearly stone-deaf—"

"Then what would be your idea?"

"It would, I am afraid, be only too simple for someone to come through the garden, during the day when I am out and Mrs. Jacket is engaged elsewhere—"

"I see," said Petrella. "Preparation by day. Execution by night." It was possible. He could think of no logical objection. It just failed to fit in with his previous experience of how burglars worked. "You can put a temporary catch on for tonight. A stout piece of wire across the handles should do it. And have it replaced tomorrow. You'd better give me a ring if anything further happens."

Mr. Bonny promised that he would give him a ring. He also gave him a second whiskey.

The next call came three nights later—at about seven o'clock when Petrella was going off duty. He again drove himself up to Gosselin Park. Mr. Bonny had seen a suspicious character hanging round the bottom of his garden. It was too dark to make any effective search that night, but Mr. Bonny was in such a state of alarm that Petrella spent twenty minutes in his "snuggery," reassuring him and drinking his whiskey. He promised that he would pass the word to the man on the local beat to keep his eyes open. Mr. Bonny was overcome with gratitude, and over their second drink he said, "All this running about after hours, it must be very tiresome for you, Inspector. There ought to be an arrangement by which a householder like myself can pay you overtime."

"There ought to be, indeed," said Petrella heartily. "I've often thought so myself. I'll pass the suggestion on to the Superintendent when I see him next."

He drove back to Gabriel Street, parked the car, had a meal at an eating house in the High Street, and

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walked home to his temporary, and not very satisfactory lodgings in Portugal Crescent. His choice in the evenings was between sharing the downstairs sitting room with three old ladies and getting into his bed and reading. The decision did not take long to make and he was soon settled into bed, the gas fire on, his reading lamp alight, and in his hand a collection of Father Brown stories by G. K. Chesterton.

On the following morning he sent for Sergeant Croft, invited him to sit down, and said, "I think the time has come to deal with Mr. Bonny."

To say that Sergeant Croft looked startled would have been exaggerating the matter. His battered face was not one which registered emotion easily. Nevertheless, Petrella received the impression that he was leaving a good deal unsaid when he simply replied, "Yes, sir. What were you thinking of doing?"

"Nothing right at this moment," said Petrella. "What I want you to do is to let me know as soon as we get another shop break. If we can hear about it early enough we ought to be able to organize something. *Prompt* information is what's going to count here. Tell everyone that. If any of our men see anything suspicious, they're to let me—or you—know at once. Of course, you needn't explain what's behind it. In fact, this had better remain just between the two of us for the moment. Right?"

Sergeant Croft again looked as if he were going to say something, then swallowed hard, turned on his heel, and stumped out. Petrella sat staring after him.

It was almost exactly a week later that Police Constable Whittaker, passing the end of Carfax Passage, a cul-de-sac off Station Road, noticed something. A packing case, which had been lying on its side in the gutter when he had passed that way an hour earlier, had been moved, and now was standing on one end against the wall. Whittaker flashed his torch upward, and saw the broken glass of a window.

The telephone beside Petrella's bed dragged him up from a dream in which, in full evening dress and a frogman's helmet, he was exploring the Tobermory Galleon. He surfaced with difficulty, knocked the table lamp over, managed to locate the receiver, and said, "Yes?"

"Sergeant Croft here, sir. Whittaker's just got through to me. There's been a break in Station Road. Someone got into Porter's, back way, and opened his safe. Is that the sort of thing we want?"

Petrella collected his thoughts.

"What was in the safe?"

There was a pause while Sergeant Croft consulted.

"Rings and bracelets. And a packet of uncut stones. The old boy says it's all good stuff—and easily identifiable."

"Good," said Petrella. "What's the time now? Five o'clock. I'll meet

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you at the Station at half-past six."

"Half-past six?" Sergeant Croft's voice sounded suddenly sharp. "Are you sure that's right, sir? We don't want to give this little lot a chance of sliding away."

Petrella grinned to himself savagely in the darkness.

"This isn't something we can rush," he said. "Half-past six, I said, and half-past six I meant. And pick us a heavyweight driver."

It was nearly seven o'clock when their car drifted to a halt outside Mr. Bonny's graystone front gate.

"Lock the car," said Petrella to the driver. "And come along with us. I'm not expecting a fight, but I want you to watch the back of the house. And we'll stick to the grass. We don't want a lot of noise."

Outside the front door Petrella and Sergeant Croft stood and listened.

"There's a light in the hall," said Croft. It was the first words he had spoken since they had set out.

"Listen," said Petrella.

"Someone's moving in one of the back rooms, too."

"All right. I'm going to ring the bell and count ten, slowly. If nothing's happened, we'll break a window and go in. Here goes. One—two—three—"

He had reached eight when the front door swung open. It was Mr. Bonny. When he recognized his visitors, he took a quick, shuffling step backward, and as they crowded through the front door after him, he stepped back again, his mouth working, his florid face drained of color, his eyes swiveling from Petrella to Croft and back again. Then his knees folded, and he went down onto the hall floor.

"It's his heart," said Petrella. "I never trusted his color." He was loosening Mr. Bonny's collar and tie. "Get an ambulance. That'll be quicker than trying to carry him down to the car."

Sergeant Croft telephoned. Petrella got a small rug from one of the front rooms and put it over Mr. Bonny. His lips were a bit blue, but he was breathing.

He was recalled to his mission by a knocking from the back of the house. He went along the passage and into Mr. Bonny's study. Here the lights were on and the curtains tightly drawn. He went over to the French windows, pulled back the curtains, and saw the anxious face of his driver peering through. He slipped the catch.

"You were all so quiet I reckoned he must have done you in," said the driver.

"He's done himself," said Petrella.

On the study table were three cardboard boxes. Two were already packaged in neat brown paper. The third was still unwrapped. Petrella lifted the lid. Inside was a blue case with *Porter's. Jewellers and Silversmiths* in small gold letters on the lid.

Behind him he heard Sergeant Croft breathing down his neck.

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"Here it is," Petrella said, "so fresh it's almost warm to the touch. Another thirty minutes and it would have been away."

He pointed to the two packets which had been sealed. They had been addressed in bold black capitals, one to *A. Smith, Post Restante, Lossiemouth,* the other to *B. Smith, Post Restante, Bangor.*

Outside they heard the ambulance bell coming up the drive.

"They'll pull him round all right," said Superintendent Benjamin. It was late that afternoon, and they were sitting in the Superintendent's office.

"He's a dying man, and I suppose I ought to be sorry for him," said Petrella, "but I'm not. He's done too much mischief."

"He won't be causing anyone much more trouble now," said Benjamin. "Just tell me how you worked it out."

"Most of the credit must go to a Mr. Cornstalk," said Petrella. "If he hadn't got up so early, we might never have seen it. The rest goes to G. K. Chesterton."

Benjamin said cautiously, "How do you mean?" Superintendent Haxtell had warned him that Petrella was odd, that he read poetry and had even been known to quote it.

"The late Mr. Chesterton pointed out that the postman on his rounds is truly an invisible man—because everyone expects him to be there. Mr. Bonny's system was based on precisely that notion. He'd let it be known that if anyone stole anything, like jewellery or watches, or lighters—anything small and valuable and fairly portable—he'd give tiptop prices for it. *With one strict proviso.* You had to bring it to his house between half-past six and half-past seven in the morning, or between half-past four and half-past five in the afternoon."

"Yes, I see," said Benjamin, "the two daily visits of the postman. And as soon as Bonny got anything, he parceled it up and mailed it off to—who? Were A. Smith of Lossiemouth and B. Smith of Bangor and C. Smith of goodness-knows-where just Bonny himself?"

"There's a lot of work still to do on that angle, sir," said Petrella. "But my guess is they're real people. What I imagine happened was that if they could dispose of the stuff they paid Bonny in kind—surplus goods, bankrupt stock, and so on. At a cracking discount, of course. Which Bonny then sold at a handsome profit in his shop."

"And if they couldn't?"

"After a month or so they'd probably collect and post the parcel back to Bonny. Or to another Poste Restante, if Bonny hadn't found a buyer for it."

"Magnificent," said Benjamin. "And he did it all without setting foot outside his house. I suppose the postman picked up the parcels in the hall. They often will if you treat

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them right. Morning *and* evening, you say?"

"I think so. That's why he wouldn't have me in the house before seven. When he sent for me about his burglary—he'd made all that up, of course—I jumped to the conclusion that he was trying the same tricks on me as he did with Carver."

The Superintendent looked up, but said nothing.

"He did put out a feeler about bribery. But I thought it was more that he wanted people to notice me visiting him in his private house, and start jumping to conclusions."

The faintest of smiles wrinkled the Superintendent's forehead. "He underestimated you," he said.

When Petrella had departed, the Superintendent sat on for a few minutes, deep in thought. It was an excellent day's work. No doubt about it. There were loose ends to be tied up but further investigation —a copy of Mr. Bonny's telephone account, for instance—might lead to startling results in far corners of the country, or even on the Continent. He unlocked a drawer in his desk and pulled out a sheet of official paper, on which a report had been laboriously typed.

It started, "Sir, I feel it my painful duty to report to you—" and went on to say that Detective Inspector Petrella had lately become friendly with Mr. Bonny ("Suspected of being a receiver of stolen goods") and had twice been observed to visit his house after dark, without thereafter making any official report on the subject of his visit.

It was signed, "A. Croft. Detective Sergeant."

The Superintendent tore it slowly into small bits and deposited the pieces in the wastepaper basket. Better days, he felt, might be at hand now for Gabriel Street Police Station.

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